SKYRIDER

BY

B. M. BOWER

SKYRIDER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

JEAN OF THE LAZY A

GOOD INDIAN

THE UPHILL CLIMB

THE GRINGOS

THE FLYING U'S LAST STAND

THE PHANTOM HERD

THE HERITAGE OF THE SIOUX

THE QUIRT

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B. M. BOWER

METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published in Great Britain in 1920

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SKYRIDER

CHAPTER I

A POET WITHOUT HONOUR

Before I die, I'll ride the sky;
I'll part the clouds like foam,
I'll brand each star with the Rolling R,
And lead the Great Bear home.

I'll circle Mars to beat the cars,
On Venus I will call:
If she greets me fair as I ride the air,
To meet her I will stall.

I'll circle high—as if passing by—
Then volplane, bank, and land;
Then if she'll smile I'll stop awhile,
And kiss her snow-white hand.

To toast her health and wish her wealth,
I'll drink the Dipper dry.
Then say, "Hop in, and we'll take a spin,
For I'm a rider of the sky."

Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat—

MARY V flipped the rough paper over with so little tenderness that a corner tore in her fingers, but the next page was blank. She made a sound suspiciously like a snort, and threw the tablet down on the littered table of the bunk house.

After all, what did she care where they floated—Venus and Johnny Jewel? Riding the sky with Venus when he knew very well that his place was out in the big corral, riding some of those broom-tail bronks that he was being paid a salary—a *good* salary—for breaking! Mary V thought that her father ought to be told about the way Johnny was spending all his time—writing silly poetry about Venus. It was the first she had ever known about his being a poet. Though it was pretty punk, in Mary V's opinion. She was glad and thankful that Johnny had refrained from writing any such doggerel about *her*. That would have been perfectly intolerable. That he should write poetry at all was intolerable. The more she thought of it, the more intolerable it became.

Just for punishment, and as a subtle way of letting him know what she thought of him and his idiotic jingle, she picked up the tablet, and the pencil Johnny had used, and did a little poetizing herself. She could have rhymed it much better, of course, if she had condescended to give any thought whatever to the matter, which she did not. Condescension went far enough when she stooped to reprove the idiot by finishing the verse that he had failed to finish, because he had already overtaxed his poor little brain.

Stooping, then, to reprove, and flout, and ridicule, Mary V finished the verse so that it read thus:

Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat—
For Venus I am truly sorry!
All the stars you sight, you witless wight,
You'll see when you and Venus light!
But then—I'm sure that I should worry!

Mary V was tempted to write more. She rather

fancied that term "witless wight" as applied to Johnny Jewel. It had a classical dignity which atoned for the slang made necessary by her instant need of a rhyme for sorry.

But there was the danger of being caught in the act by some meddlesome fellow who loved to come snooping around where he had no business, so Mary V placed the tablet open on the table just as she had found it, and left the bunk house without deigning to fulfil the errand of mercy that had taken her there. Why should she trouble to sew the lining in a coat sleeve for a fellow who pined for a silly flirtation with Venus? Let Johnny Jewel paw and struggle to get into his coat. Better, let Venus sew that lining for him!

Mary V stopped half-way to the house, and hesitated. It had occurred to her that she might add another perfectly withering verse to that poem. It could start: "While sailing in my airplane boat, I'll ask Venus to mend my coat."

Mary V started back, searing couplets forming with incredible swiftness in her brain. How she would flay Johnny Jewel with the keen blade of her wit! If he thought he was the only person at the Rolling R ranch who could write poetry, it would be a real kindness to show him his mistake.

Just then Bud Norris and Bill Hayden came up from the corrals, heading straight for the bunk house. Mary V walked on, past the bunk house and across the narrow flat opposite the corrals and up on the first bench of the bluff that sheltered the ranch buildings from the worst of the desert winds. She did it very innocently, and as though she had never in her life had any thought of invading the squat adobe building kept sacred to the leisure hours of the Rolling R boys.

There was a certain ledge where she had played when she was a child, and which she favoured nowadays as a place to sit and look down upon the activities in the big corral—whenever activities were taking place therein—an interested spectator who was not suspected of being within hearing. As a matter of fact, Mary V could hear nearly everything that was said in that corral, if the wind was right. She could also see very well indeed, as the boys had learned to their cost when their riding did not come quite up to the mark. She made for that ledge now.

She had no more than settled herself comfortably when Bud and Bill came cackling from the bunk house. A little chill of apprehension went up Mary V's spine and into the roots of her hair. She had not thought of the possibilities of that open tablet falling into other hands than Johnny Jewel's.

"Hyah! You gol-darn witless wight," bawled Bud Norris, and slapped Bill Hayden on the back and roared. "Hee-yah! Skyrider! When yo all git done kissin' Venus's snow-white hand, come and listen at what's been wrote for yo' all by Mary V! Whoo-*ee!* Where's the Great Bear at that yo' all was goin' to lead home, Skyrider?" Then they laughed like two maniacs. Mary V gritted her teeth at them and wished aloud that she had her shotgun with her.

A youth, whose sagging chaps pulled in his waistline until he looked almost as slim as a girl, ceased dragging at the bridle reins of a balky bronk and glanced across the corral. His three companions were hurrying that way, lured by a paper which Bud was waving high above his head as he straddled the top rail of the fence.

"Johnny's a poet, and we didn't know it!" bawled Bud. "Listen here at what the witless wight's been a-writin'!" Then, seated upon the top rail and with his hat set far back on his head, Bud Norris began to declaim inexorably the first two verses, until the indignant author came over and interfered with voice and a vicious yank at Bud's foot, which brought that young man down forthwith.

"Aw, le' me alone while I read the rest! Honest, it's swell po'try, and I want the boys to hear it. Listen—get out, Johnny! '*I'll circle high as if passing by, then—v-o-l—then vollup, bank, an' land—*' Hold him off'n me, boys! This is rich stuff I'm readin'! Hey, hold your hand over his mouth, why don't yuh, Aleck? Yo' all want to wait till I git to where——"

"I can't," wailed Aleck. "He bit me!"

"Well, take 'im down an' set on him, then. I tell yuh, boys, this is rich——"

"You give that back here, or I'll murder yuh!" a full-throated young voice cried hoarsely.

"Here, quit yore kickin'!" Bill admonished. "Go on, Bud; the boys have got to hear it—it's *rich!*"

"Yeh—shut up, Johnny! Po'try is wrote to be read—go on, Bud. Start 'er over again. I never got to hear half of it on account of Johnny's cussin'. Go on—I got him chewin' on my hat now. Read 'er from the start-off."

"The best is yet to come," Bill gloated pantingly, while he held the author's legs much as he would hold down a yearling. "All set, Bud—let 'er go!"

Whereupon Bud cleared his throat and began again, rolling the words out sonorously, so that Mary V heard every word distinctly:

"Before I die, I'll ride the sky;
I'll part the clouds like foam.
I'll brand each star with the Rolling R,
And lead the Great Bear home."

"Say, that's *swell!*" a little fellow they called Curley interjected. "By gosh, that's darned good po'try! I never knowed Johnny could——"

He was frowned into silence by the reader, who went on exuberantly, the lines punctuated by profane gurgles from the author.

"Now this here," Bud paused to explain, "was c'lab'rated on by Mary V. The first line was wrote by our 'steemed young friend an' skyrider poet, but the balance is in Mary V's handwritin'. And I claim she's some poet! Quit cussin' and listen, Johnny; yo' all never heard this 'un, and I'll gamble on it:

"*Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat*——' That there's by Skyrider. And here Mary V finishes it up:

"For Venus I am truly sorry!
All the stars you sight, you witless wight,
You'll see when you and Venus light!
But then—I'm sure that I should worry!"

"I don't believe she ever wrote that!" Johnny struggled up to declare passionately. "You give that here, Bud Norris. Worry—sorry—they don't even rhyme!"

"Aw, ferget that stuff! Witless wight's all right, ain't it? I claim Mary V's some poetry writer. Don't you go actin' up jealous. She ain't got the jingle, mebby, but she shore is there with the big idee."

"'*Drink the Dipper dry*'—that shore does hit me where I live!" cried little Curley. "Did you make it up outa yore own head, Johnny?"

"Naw. I made it up out of a spellin' book!"

Johnny, being outnumbered five to one, decided to treat the whole matter with lofty unconcern. "Hand it over, Bud."

Bud did not want to hand it over. He had just discovered that he could sing it, which he proceeded to do to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" and the full capacity of his lungs. Bill and Aleck surged up to look over his shoulder and join their efforts to his, and the half-dozen horses held captive in that corral stampeded to a far corner and huddled there, shrinking at the uproar.

"*And kiss 'er snow-white ha-and, and kiss 'er snow-white ha-and,*" howled the quartet inharmoniously, at least two of them off key; for Tex Martin had joined the concert and was performing with a bull bellow that could be heard across a section. Then Bud began suddenly to improvise, and his voice rose valiantly that his words might carry their meaning to the ears of Johnny Jewel, who had stalked back across the corral and was striving now to catch the horse he had let go, while his one champion, little Curley, shooed the animal into a corner for him.

"*It would be grand to kiss her hand, her snow-white hand, if I had the sand!*" Bud chanted vainglorioously. "How's that, Skyrider? Ain't that purty fair po'try?"

"It don't fit into the tune with a cuss," Tex criticized jealously. "Pass over that po'try of Johnny's. Yo' all ain't needin' it—not if you aims to make up yore own words."

"C'm *'ere!* You wall-eyed weiner-wurst!" Johnny harshly addressed the horse he was after. "You've got about as much brains as the rest of this outfit—and that's putting it strong! If I owned you——"

"*I'd cir-cle high 's if pass-in' by, then vol-lup,*

bank an' la-a-and," the voice of Tex roared out in a huge wave that drowned all other sounds, the voices of Bill, Aleck, and Bud trailing raucously after.

Johnny, goaded out of his lofty contempt of them, whirled suddenly and picked up a rock. Johnny could pitch a very fair ball for an amateur, and the rock went true without any frills or curving deception. It landed in the middle of Bud Norris's back, and Bud's vocal efforts ended in a howl of pain.

"Serves you right, you devil!" Mary V commented unsympathetically from her perch on the ledge.

Three more rocks ended the concert abruptly and started something else. Curley had laughed hysterically until the four faced belligerently Johnny's bombardment and started for him. "Beat it, Johnny! Beat it!" cried Curley then, and made for the fence.

"I will, like hell!" snarled Johnny, and gathered more rocks.

"Oh, Johnny! Sudden's comin'!" wailed Curley from the top rail. "Quit it, Johnny, or you'll git fired!"

"I don't give a damn if I do!" Johnny's full, young voice shouted ragefully. "It'll save me firing myself. Before I'll work with a bunch of yellow-bellied, pin-headed fools——" He threw a clod of dirt that caught Tex on the chin and filled his mouth so that he nearly choked, and a jagged pebble that hit Aleck just over the ear a glancing blow that sent him reeling. The third was aimed at Bill, but Bill ducked in time, and the rock went on over his head and very nearly laid out Mary V's father, he whom the boys called "Sudden" for some inexplicable reason.

Mary V's father dodged successfully the rock,

saw a couple of sheets of paper lying on the ground, and methodically picked them up before he advanced to where his men were trying to appear very busy with the horses, or with their ropes, or with anything save what had held their attention just previous to his coming.

All save Johnny, who was too mad to care a rap what old Sudden Selmer thought of him or did to him. He went straight up to the boss.

"I'll thank you for that paper," he said hardily. "It's mine, and the boys have been acting the fool with it."

"Yeh? They have?" Selmer turned from the first page and read the second without any apparent emotion. "You write that?"

Johnny flushed. "Yes, sir, I did. Do you mind letting——"

"That what I heard them yawping here in the corral?" Selmer folded the paper with care, his fingers smoothing out the wrinkles and pausing to observe the place where Mary V had torn off a corner.

"Poets and song birds on the pay roll, eh? Thought I hired you boys to handle horses." Having folded the papers as though they were to be placed in an envelope, Sudden held the verses out to Johnny. "As riders," he observed judicially, "I know just about what you boys are worth to me. As poets and singers, I doubt whether the Rolling R can find use for you. What capacity do I find you in, Curley? Director of the orchestra, or umpire?"

Curley climbed shamefacedly off the fence and picked up his rope. The business of taming bronks was resumed in a dead silence broken only by the trampling of the horses and a muttered oath now and then. A lump over Aleck's ear was swelling so

that the hair lifted there, and Bud limped and sent scowling glances at Johnny Jewel. Tex spat dirt off his tongue and scowled while he did it; indeed, no eyes save those of little Curley seemed able to look upon Johnny with a kindly light.

Mary V's father stood dispassionately watching them for five minutes or so before he turned back to the gate. Not once had he smiled or shown any emotion whatever. But he had a new story to tell his friends in the clubs of Tuson, Phœnix, Yuma, Los Angeles. And whenever he told it, Sudden Selmer would repeat what he called *The Skyrider's Dream* from the first verse to Mary V's last—even unto Bud's improvization. He would paint Johnny's bombardment of the choir practice until his audience could almost hear the thud of the rocks when they landed. He would describe the welt on Aleck's head, the exact shade of purple in Curley's face when his boss called him off the fence. He would not smile at all during the recital, but his audience would shout and splutter and roar, and when he paused as though the story was done, some one would be sure to demand more.

Then a little twitching smile would show at the corner of Sudden's lips, and he would drawl whimsically: "Those boys were so scared they never chirped when the poet actually went skyriding to an altitude of about ten feet above the saddle horn, and lit on the back of his neck. Johnny's a good rider, too, but he was mad. He was so mad I don't believe he knows yet that he was piled. Afterwards? Oh, well, they came to along about supper time and yawped his poetry all over the place, I heard. But that was after I had left the ranch."

There were a few details which Sudden, being only human, could not possibly give his friends. He

could not know that Mary V went back down the hill, sneaked into the bunk house and got Johnny's coat, and sewed the sleeve lining in very neatly, and took the coat back without being seen. Nor did he know that she violently regretted the deed of kindness, when she discovered that Johnny remained perfectly unconscious of the fact that his coat sleeve no longer troubled him.

CHAPTER II

ONE FIGHT, TWO QUARRELS, AND A RIDDLE

ROLLING R RANCH lies down near the border of Mexico—near as distances are counted in Arizona. Possibly a hawk could make it in one flight straight across that jagged, sandy, spiney waste of scenery which the chance traveller visions the moment you mention southern Arizona, but if you wanted to ride to the Border from the Rolling R corrals, you would find the trip a half-day proposition. As to the exact location, never mind about that.

The Selmer Stock Company had other ranches where they raised other animals, but the Rolling R raised horses almost exclusively, the few hundred head of cattle not being counted as a real ranch industry, but rather an incidental by-product. Rolling R Ranch was the place Sudden Selmer called home, although there was a bungalow out in the Wilshire District in Los Angeles about which Sudden would grumble when the tax notice came in his mail. There was a big touring car in the garage on the back of the lot, and there was a coloured couple who lived in two rooms of the bungalow for sake of the fire insurance and as a precaution against thieves, and to keep the lawn watered and clipped and the dust off the furniture. They admitted that they had a

snap, for they were seldom disturbed in their leisurely caretaking routine save in the winter. Even Mary V always tired of the place after a month or two in it, and would pack her trunk and "hit the trail" for the Rolling R.

Speaking of Mary V, you would know that a girl with modern upbringing lived a good deal at the ranch. You could tell by the low, green bungalow with wide, screened porches and light cream trim, that was almost an exact reproduction of the bungalow in Los Angeles. A man and woman who have lived long together on a ranch like the Rolling R would have gone on living contentedly in the adobe house which was now abandoned to the sole occupancy of the boys. It is the young lady of the family who demands up-to-date housing.

So the bungalow stood there in the glaring sun, surrounded by a scrap of lawn which the Arizona winds whipped and buffeted with sand and wind all summer, and vines which the wind tousled into discouragement. And fifty yards away squatted the old adobe house in the sand, with a tree at each front corner and a narrow porch extending from one to the other.

Beyond the adobe, toward the sheltering bluff, a cluster of low sheds, round-pole corrals, a modern barn of fair size, and beside it a square corral of planks and stout new posts, continued the tale of how progress was joggling the elbow of picturesqueness. Sudden's father had built the adobe and the oldest sheds and corrals, when he took all the land he could lawfully hold under government claims. Later he had bought more; and Sudden, growing up and falling heir to it all, had added tract after tract by purchase and lease and whatever other devices a good politician may be able to command.

Sudden's father had been a simple man, content to run his ranch along the lines of least resistance, and to take what prosperity came to him in the natural course of events. Sudden had organized a company, had commercialized his legacy, had "married money," and had made money. Far to the north and to the east and west ran the lines of other great ranches, where sheep were handled in great, blatting bands and yielded a fortune in wool. There were hills where Selmer cattle were wild as deer—cattle that never heard the whistle of a locomotive until they were trailed down to the railroad to market.

These made the money for Selmer and his company. But it was the Rolling R, where the profits were smaller, that stood closest to Sudden's heart. There was not so much money in horses as there was in sheep; Sudden admitted it readily enough. But he hated sheep; hated the sound of them and the smell of them and the insipid, questioning faces of them. And he loved horses; loved the big-jointed, wabbly-legged colts and the round-bodied anxious mothers; loved the grade geldings and fillies and the registered stock that he kept close to home in fenced pastures; loved the broom-tail bronks that ranged far afield and came in a dust cloud moiling up from their staccato hoof-beats, circled by hoarse, shouting riders seen vaguely through the cloud.

There was a thrill in watching a corral full of wild horses milling round and round, dodging the whispering ropes that writhed here and there overhead to settle and draw tight over some unlucky head. There was a thrill in the taming—more thrills than dollars, for until the war overseas brought eager buyers, the net profits of the horse ranch would scarcely have paid for Mary V's clothes and school and

what she demurely set down as "recreation."

But Sudden loved it, and Mary V loved it, and Mary V's mother loved whatever they loved. So the Rolling R was home. And that is why the Rolling R boys looked upon Mary V with unglamoured eyes, being thoroughly accustomed to the sight of her and to the sharp tongue of her and to the frequent discomfort of having her about.

They liked her, of course. They would have fought for her if ever the need of fighting came, just as they would have fought for anything else in their outfit. But they took her very calmly and as a matter of course, and were not inclined to that worshipful bearing which romancers would have us accept as the inevitable attitude of cowboys toward the daughter of the rancho.

Wherefore Johnny Jewel was not committing any heinous act of treason when he walked past Mary V with stiffened spine and head averted. Johnny was mad at the whole outfit, and that included Mary V. Indeed, his anger particularly included Mary V. A young man who has finished high school and one year at a university, and who reads technical books rather than fiction and has ambitions for something much higher than his present calling—oh, very much higher!—would naturally object to being called a witless wight.

Johnny objected. He had cussed Aleck for repeating the epithet in the bunk house, and he had tried to lick Bud Norris, and had failed. He blamed Mary V for his skinned knuckles and the cut on his lip, and for all his other troubles. Johnny did not know about the coat, though he had it on; and if he had known, I doubt whether it would have softened his mood. He was a terribly incensed young man.

Mary V had let her steps lag a little, knowing that Johnny must overtake her presently unless he turned short round and went the other way, which would not be like Johnny. She had meant to say something that would lead the conversation gently toward the verses, and then she meant to say something else about the difficulty of making two lines rhyme, and the necessity of using perfectly idiotic words—such as wight. Mary V was disgusted with the boys for the way they had acted. She meant to tell Johnny that she thought his verses were very clever, and that she, too, was keen for flying. And would he like to borrow a late magazine she had in the house, that had an article about the growth of the "game"? Mary V did not know that she would have sounded rather patronizing. Her girl friends in Los Angeles had filled her head with romantic ideas about cowboys, especially her father's cowboys. They had taken it so for granted that the Rolling R boys must simply worship the ground she walked on, that Mary V had unconsciously come to believe that adoration was her birthright.

And then Johnny stepped out of the trail and passed her as though she had been a cactus or a rock that he must walk around! Mary V went hot all over with rage before her wits came back. Johnny had not gone ten feet ahead of her when she was humming softly to herself a little old-fashioned tune. And the tune was "Auld Lang Syne."

Johnny whirled in the trail and faced her, hard-eyed.

"You're trying to play smart Aleck, too, are yuh?" he demanded. "Why don't yuh sing the words that's in your mind? Why don't you *try* to sing your own ideas of poetry? You know as much about writing poetry as I do about tatting!

'Worry'! 'surrey'! Or did you mean that it should be read 'wawry,' 'sorry'?"

A fine way to talk to the Flower of the Rancho! Mary V looked as though she wanted to slap Johnny Jewel's smooth, boyish face.

"Of course, you're qualified to teach me," she retorted. "Such doggerel! You ought to send it to the comic papers. Really, Mr. Jewel, I have read a good deal of amateurish, childish attempts at poetry—in the infant class at school. But never in all my life——"

"Oh, well, if you ever get out of the infant class, Miss Selmer, you may learn a few rudimentary rules of metrical composition. I apologize for criticizing your efforts. It is not so bad—for infant-class work." He said that, standing there in the very coat which she had mended for him!

Mary V turned white; also she wished that *she* had thought of mentioning the "rudimentary rules of metrical composition" instead of infant classes. She smiled as disagreeably as was possible to such humanly kissable lips as hers.

"No, is it?" she agreed sweetly. "Witless wight was rather good, I thought. Wight fits you so well."

"Oh, that!" Johnny turned defensively to a tolerant condescension. "That wasn't so bad, if it hadn't shown on the face of it that it was just dragged in to make a rhyme. Do you know what wight means, Miss Selmer?"

Mary V was inwardly shaken. She had always believed that wight was a synonym for dunce, but now that he put the question to her in that tone, she was not positive. Her angry eyes faltered a little.

"I see you don't—of course. Used as a noun—you know what a noun is, don't you? It means the name of anything. Wight means a person—any

creature. Originally it meant a fairy, a supernatural being. As an adjective it means brave, valiant, strong or powerful. Or, it used to mean clever."

"Oh, *you!* I hate the sight of you, you great bully!" Mary V ducked past him and ran.

"I'll help you look it up in the dictionary if you don't know how," Johnny called after her maliciously, not at all minding the epithet she had hurled at him. He went on more cheerfully, telling himself unchivalrously that he had got Mary V's goat, all right. He began to whistle under his breath, until he discovered that he was whistling "Auld Lang Syne," and was mentally fitting to the tune the words: *"Before I die, I'll ride the sky, I'll part the clouds like foam!"*

He stopped whistling then, but the words went on repeating themselves over and over in his mind. "And by gosh, I will too," he stated defiantly. "I'll show 'em, the darned mutts! They can yawp and chortle and call me Skyrider as if it was a joke. That's as much as they know, the ignorant boobs. Why, they couldn't tell an aileron from an elevator if it was to save their lives!—and still they think I'm crazy and don't know anything. Why, darn 'em, they'll *pay money* some day to see me fly! Boy, I'd like to circle over this ranch at about three or four thousand feet, and then do a loop or two and volplane right down *at* 'em! Gosh, they'd be hunting holes to crawl into before I was through with 'em! I will, too——

Johnny went off into a pet day-dream and was almost happy for a little while. Some day the Rolling R boys would be telling with pride how they used to know Johnny Jewel, the wonderful birdman that had his picture in all the papers and was getting thousands of dollars for exhibition flights. Tex,

Aleck, Bud, Bill—Mary V, too, gol darn her!—would go around bragging just because they used to know him! And right then he'd sure play even for some of the insults they were handing him now.

"Mary V Selmer? Let's see—the name sounds familiar, somehow. O-oh! You mean that little red-headed ranch girl from Arizona? Oh-h, yes! Well, give her a free pass—but I mustn't be bothered personally with her. The girl's all right, but no training, no manners. Hick stuff; no class, you understand. But give her a good seat where she can view the getaway."

Tex, Aleck, Bud, and Bill—little Curley was all right; Curley could have a job as watchman at the hangar. But the rest of the bunch could goggle at him from a distance, and be darned to them. Old Sudden too. He'd be kind of nice to old Sudden—nice in an off-hand, indifferent kind of way. But Mary V could get down on her *knees*, and he wouldn't be nice to her. He should say not!

So dreamed Johnny Jewel, all the way to the mail box out by the main road, and nearly all the way back again. But then his ears were assailed with lugubrious singing:

> "An' dlead the Great Bear ho-o-ome,
> An' dlead the Great Bear hoo-me,
> I'll brand each star with the Rollin' R,
> An-n dlead the Great Bear home!"

That was Budd's contribution.

"Aw, for gosh sake, *shut up!*" yelled Johnny, his temper rising again.

From the bungalow, when he passed it on his way to the bunk house, came the measured thump-thump of a piano playing the same old tune with a stress meant to mock him and madden him.

"Then if she'll smile I'll stop awhile,
And kiss her snow-white hand."

That was Mary V, singing at the top of her voice, and Johnny walked stiff-backed down the path. He wanted to turn and repeat to Mary V what he had shouted to Bud, but he refrained, though not from any chivalry, I am sorry to say. Johnny feared that it would be playing into her hand too much if he took that much notice of her. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing he heard her.

"It would be grand to kiss 'er hand,
Her-rr snow-white hand if I had the sand,"

Bud finished unctuously, adjusting the tune to fit the words.

Johnny swore, flung open the low door of the bunk house, went in, and slammed it shut after him, and began to pack his personal belongings. Presently Tex came in, warbling like a lovesick crow:

"I'll cir-cle high 's if pass-in' by,
Then vol-lup, bank-an' la-a-and——"

"So will this la-and," Johnny said viciously, and threw one of his new riding boots straight at the warbler. "For gosh sake, lay off that stuff!"

Tex caught the boot dexterously without interrupting his song, except that he forgot the words and sang ta-da-da-da to the end of the verse.

"Po'try was wrote to be read," he replied sententiously when he had finished. "And tunes was made to be sung. And yo'-all oughta be proud to death at the way yo'-all made a hit with yore po'try. It beats what Mary V wrote, Skyrider. If yo'-all want to know my honest opinion, Mary V's plumb sore because yo'-all made up po'try about Venus instid of about her." He sat down on a corner of

the littered table and began to roll a cigarette, jerking his head towards the bungalow and lowering one eyelid slowly. "Girls, I'm plumb next to 'em, Skyrider. I growed up with four of 'em. Mary V loves that there Venus stuff, and kissin' her snow-white hand, same as a cat loves snow. Jealous—that's what's bitin' Mary V."

Johnny was sorting etters, mostly circulars and "follow up" letters from various aviation schools. He looked up suspiciously at Tex, but Tex manifested none of the symptoms of sly "kidding." Tex was smoking meditatively and gazing absently at Johnny's suitcase.

"Yo'-all ain't quittin'?" Tex roused himself to ask. "Not over a little josh? Say, you're layin' yoreself wide open to more of the same. Yo'-all wants to take it the way it's meant, Skyrider. Listen here, boy, if yo'-all wants to git away from the ranch right now, why don't yo'-all speak for to stay at Sinkhole camp? Yo'-all could have mo' time to write po'try an' study up on flyin' machines, down there. And Pete, he's aimin' to quit the first. He don't like it down there."

Johnny dropped the letters back into his suit-case and sat down on the side of his bed to smoke. His was not the nature to hold a grudge, and Tex seemed to be friendly. Still, his youthful dignity had been very much hurt, and by Tex as much as the other boys. He gave him a supercilious glance.

"I don't know where you get the idea that I'm a quitter," he said pettishly. "First I knew that a bunch of rough-necks could kid me out of a job. Go down to Sinkhole yourself, if you're so anxious about that camp. Furthermore," he added stiffly, "it's nobody's business but mine what I write or study, or where I write and study. So don't set

there trying to look wise, Tex—telling me what to do and how to do it. You can't put anything over on me; your work is too raw. Al-to-gether too raw!"

He glanced sidewise at a circular letter he had dropped, picked it up and began reading it slowly, one eye squinted against the smoke of his cigarette, his manner that of supreme indifference to Tex and all his kind. Johnny could be very very indifferent when he chose.

He did not really believe that Tex was trying to put anything over on him; he just said that to show Tex he didn't give a darn one way or the other. But Tex seemed to take it seriously, and glowered at Johnny from under his black eyebrows that had a hawk-like arch.

"What yo'-all think I'm trying to put over? Hey? What yo'-all mean by that statement?"

Johnny looked up, one eye still squinted against the smoke. The other showed surprise back of the indifference. "You there yet?" he wanted to know. "What's the big idea? Gone to roost for the night?"

Tex leaned toward him, waggling one finger at Johnny. The outer end of his eyebrows were twitching—a sign of anger in Tex, as Johnny knew well.

"What yo'-all got up yore sleeve—saying my work is raw! What yo'-all aimin 'at? That's what I'm roostin' here to learn."

Johnny fanned away the smoke and gave a little chuckle meant to exasperate Tex, which it did.

"I guess the roosting's going to be pretty good," he said. "You better send cookee word to bring your meals to yuh, Tex. Because if you roost there till I tell yuh, you'll be roosting a good long while!" He got up and lounged out, his hands in his pockets,

his well-shaped head carried at a provocative tilt. He heard Tex swear under his breath and mutter something about making the darned little runt come through yet, whereat Johnny grinned maliciously.

Half-way to the corral, however, Johnny's steps slowed as though he were walking straight up to a wall. The wall was there, but it was mental, and it was his mind that halted before it, astonished.

What had touched Tex off so suddenly when Johnny had flung out that meaningless taunt? Meaningless to Johnny—but how about Tex?

"Gosh! He took it like a guilty conscience," said Johnny. "What the horn-toad has Tex been doin'?"

CHAPTER III

JOHNNY GOES GAILY ENOUGH TO SINKHOLE

JOHNNY JEWEL, moved by the fluctuating determination of the young, went to bed that night fully resolved that he would not quit a good job just because untoward circumstance compelled him to herd with a bunch of brainless clowns. He, who had a definite aim in life, would not permit that aim to be turned aside because various and sundry rough-neck punchers thought it was funny to go around yelping like a band of coyotes. Mary V, too—he did not neglect to include Mary V. Indeed, much of his determination to remain was born of his desire to crush that insolent young woman with polite, pitying toleration.

Even when the boys trooped in and began to compose what they believed to be rhymes, Johnny did not weaken. He turned his face to the wall and ignored them. Poor simps, what more could you expect? They went so far as to attempt some poetizing on the subject of Johnny's downfall in the corral, but no one seemed able to eliminate the word bronk at the end of the first line, "*Johnny tried to ride a bronk.*" No one seemed able, either, to find any rhyme but honk. They tried ker-plunk, and although that seemed to answer the purpose fairly well, they were far from satisfied.

So was Johnny, but he would not say a word to save their lives. In spite of himself he heard a howl of glee when some genius among them declaimed loudly: "*Johnny volluped into Job's Coffin, and Venus she most died a-lawfin'!*"

Johnny gave a grunt of contempt, and the genius, who happened to be Bud, lifted his head off the pillow and stared at the black shadow where Johnny lay curled up like a cat.

"What's the matter with that, Skyrider? Kain't I make up po'try if I want to?"

"Sure. Help yourself—you poor fish. Vollup! *Hunh!*" The contempt was even more pronounced than before.

"Well? What's the matter with that? You said it yourself. And look out how you go peddlin' names around here. You think nobody knows anything but you! You're the little boy that invented flyin'—got the idea from yore own head, by thunder, when it swelled up like a balloon with self-conceit! That there gas-head of yourn'll take yuh right up amongst the clouds some day, and you won't need no flyin' machine, neither! Skyrider—is—*right!*" Accidentally Johnny had touched Bud's self-esteem in a tender spot. "And that's no kidding, either!" he clinched his meaning. "Punch a hole in yore skelp, and I'll bet that big haid of yourn would wizzle all up like them red balloons they sell at circuses! You——"

"*Hm-m-m!* Just so it ain't all solid bone like yours," Johnny came back at him with youth's full quota of scorn. "Keep away from pool rooms, Bud. Somebody is liable to take your head off and use it for a cue-ball. *Vollup! Hunh!*"

Bud said more; a great deal more. But Johnny flopped over on the other side, buried his head under

the blankets, and let them talk. Cue-balls—that was all their heads were good for. So why concern himself over their senseless patter?

It occurred to him, just before he went to sleep, that the unmistakable southern drawl of Tex was missing from the jumble of voices. Tex, he remembered, had been unusually silent at supper, also, and twice Johnny had caught Tex watching him sombrely. But he could think of no possible reason why Tex should want him to go down to Sinkhole Camp, and he could not see how either of them could effect the change even if Johnny had cared to go. Sudden Selmer did not ask his men what was their desire. Sudden gave orders; his men could obey or they could quit. And if Pete left, as Tex had hinted, Sudden would send some one down there, and that would be an end of it. There was just about one chance in six that Johnny Jewel would be the man to go.

Yet it so happened that Johnny did go—though Tex had nothing to do with it, so far as Johnny could see. For all his determination to stay and tolerate his companions, noon found him packed and out by the gate that opened on the stage road, waiting to flag the stage and buy a ride to town. He had accomplished, since breakfast, two fights and another quarrel with Mary V over that infernal jingle he had written. And though Johnny could not see it, Tex had had something to do with them all.

Tex was not one of these diabolically cunning villains. He did not consider himself any kind of a villain. He accepted himself more or less contentedly as a poor, striving young man who wanted to get ahead in the world and was eager to pick up what he called "side money," which might, if he were on to his job, amount to more than his wages.

Tex did not consider that he owed the Rolling R anything whatever save a certain number of days' work in each month that he drew a pay cheque. He sold Sudden his time and his skill in the saddle—a month of it for fifty dollars. But if he could double that fifty without harm to himself, Tex was not going to split any hairs over the method.

Tex was not displaying any great genius when he edged the boys on to tease Johnny beyond the limit of that young man's endurance, or when he tattled to Mary V a slighting remark about her ability as a poet. Tex was merely carrying out an idea which had come to him when he saw Johnny with his hands full of aircraft literature. If it worked, all right. If it didn't work, Johnny would not be on the Rolling R pay-roll any longer, but Tex would not have lost anything. It would be convenient to have Johnny down at Sinkhole Camp, shirking his job while he fiddled around with his flying bug. Tex believed he knew how he could keep the bug very active, and Johnny very much engrossed with it—down at Sinkhole Camp. It was simple enough, and worth the slight effort Tex was making.

So there was Johnny Jewel with his saddle and bridle and suit-case and chaps, waiting out by the mail box for the stage. And there came Sudden, driving back from the railroad—Tex knew he was expected back that forenoon—and reaching the gate before the stage had come in sight around the south-west spur of the ridge it could not cross. Sudden liked Johnny—and Tex knew that too. (Tex made it his business to know a good deal which had nothing to do with his legitimate work.) And good riders who did not get drunk every chance that offered were not to be hired every day in the week.

Johnny opened the gate, but Sudden did not drive through. He stopped and eyed the suit-case and the saddle and the chaps, and then he looked at Johnny.

"Too much song-bird stuff?" he asked, which showed how sensitive was the finger Sudden kept on the pulse of his outfit.

"I've got to work for a living, but I don't have to work with that bunch of idiots," Johnny stated with much dignity.

Sudden rubbed a gauntleted hand across the lower part of his face; and that, I think, is why Johnny saw himself taken as seriously as his young egotism demanded.

"Rather be by yourself, would you? Well, throw your baggage in the back of the car. I want you to catch up a couple of horses and go on down to Sinkhole. You won't be annoyed down there with anybody's foolishness but your own, young man. You'll work for your living, all right! Got a gun? A rifle? Well, there's one at the house you can take. There may not be any Rolling R horses going across the line—but it'll be your business to *know* there aren't. If you see a greaser prowling around, put him on the run. They're paying good money for horses in Mexico, remember. You're down there to see they don't get 'em too cheap on this side. Do you get that?"

"Yes, sir—you bet!"

"Oh. You do? Well, get in."

At the corral he turned again to Johnny. "Stop at the house when you're ready. There's a pile of *Modern Mechanics* you may as well take along. You won't have any too much time for reading, though—not if you work the way you rhyme."

"Well, I hope I work better," said Johnny, his spirits risen to where speech bubbled. "I get paid

for my work—and I guess I'd starve writing poetry for a living."

"Yes, I guess you would. Good thing you know it." Sudden swung his machine around and drove into the garage, and Johnny, untying his rope from his saddle, went into the corral to catch two fairly gentle horses.

When he was ready he rode over to the bungalow, leading the gentlest horse packed with bedding roll, "war bag," and a few odds and ends that Johnny wanted to take along. Sudden was waiting on the porch with a rifle, cartridge belt and two extra boxes of ammunition, and a sack half full of magazines. He stood with his hands in his pockets while Johnny tied rifle and sack on the saddle.

"Now I want you to understand, Johnny, that you're going down there on special work," he said, coming down the steps and standing close to the horse. "There's a telephone, and that's your protection if anything looks off-colour. Keep the stock pushed back pretty well away from the line fences. There's some good feed in those draws over east of Sinkhole creek. Let 'em graze in there—but keep an eye out for rustlers. Get to know the bunches of horses and watch their moves. You'll soon know whether they are being bothered. Pete leaves camp this afternoon. You'll probably meet him.

"And this gun—well, you keep it right with you. I don't want you to go around hunting trouble, but I want you to be ready for it if it comes. A horse looks awfully good to a greaser, remember. But no greaser likes the looks of a white man with a gun. Now let's see how much brains you've got for the job, young man. If you see to it that no Rolling R stuff comes up missing, and do it without any trouble, I'll call that making good."

"All right, I'll try and make good, then." Johnny's shoulders went back. "When a man's got some object in life beside just earning a living, he——"

From within the house full-toned chords were struck from a piano. Johnny scowled, gave his packed horse a yank, and rode off. Couldn't that girl ever let up on a fellow? Playing that darn fool tune over and over! It sure showed how much brains she had in her head! He hoped she'd get enough of it. If he was her mother or her father, he knew what he'd do with her and the whole outfit. He'd stand 'em all up in a row and make 'em sing that fool song till they were hoarse as calves on the fifth day of weaning. There was a time, too, when he had liked that girl. If she had shown any brains or feeling, he could have loved Mary V. Good thing he found out in time.

Johnny looked back from the gate and heaved a great sigh of relief at his narrow escape. Or was it regret? Johnny himself did not know, but he called it relief because that was the most comfortable emotion a young man may take away with him into desert loneliness.

Yes, sir, he was glad of the chance to stay at Sinkhole for awhile. He wouldn't be pestered to death, and he would have plenty of time to study and read. He'd send for that correspondence course on aviation, and he'd get the theory of it all down pat, so that when he had enough money saved up to go into the thing right, all he would need would be the actual practice in the air. He should think he could go to some school and work his way along; get a little practice every day, and do repair work or something the rest of the time for nothing. A dollar a minute for learning was pretty steep, Johnny thought, but

after all it was worth it. A dollar a minute—and four hundred minutes in the air for the average course!

Four hundred dollars, and only half that much saved. And then there would be his fare back east, and his board—Johnny wished that he might cut out eating, but he realized how healthy was his appetite. He counted three meals for every day, at an average of fifty cents for each meal. Well, even so, he could "ride the bumpers" to the school; take a side-door pullman; beat his way; hobo it—or whatever the initiated wanted to call it. He could send his suit-case on by express, and just wear old clothes—send his money on, too, for that matter. He could save quite a lot that way. Or maybe he could get Sudden to let him go back with cattle from the Gila River Ranch—only he wouldn't ask any favours from any one by the name of Selmer. No, he'd be darned if he would! He'd just draw his wages, when he had enough saved, and drop out of sight. He wouldn't even tell Curley where he was going. And then, some day——

There came the air castle again, floating alluringly before his eager imagination, like a mirage lake in the desert. Johnny's eyes stared head through the shimmering heat waves—stared and saw not the monotonous neutral tints of sand and rock and grey sage and yellow weeds and the rutted, dusty trail that wound away across the desert. But Mary V's face turned expectantly toward him from the crowd as he walked nonchalantly around his big tractor, testing every cable, inspecting the landing gear and the elevators and the—what-ye-may-call-'ems—and then climbing in and trying out his control—and pulling down his goggles and settling his moleskin cap and all—and then nodding imperiously to his

helper—not little Curley ; he was not big enough to crank his powerful motor—but some big guy that had a reach like——

And then the buzz and the hum, and fellows braced against the wings to hold 'er till he was ready to give the word ! And the dust storm he kicked up behind —he hoped Mary V got her eyes full, darn her !— and then, getting the feel of 'er, and giving a nod to the fellows to let go the wings ! And then——

Johnny rode along in a trance. He, his conscious inward self, was not riding a sweating bronk along a trail that wound more or less southward across the desert. That was his body, chained by grim necessity to work for a wage. He, Johnny Jewel's ego, was soaring up and up and up—up till the eagles themselves gazed enviously after. He was darting in and out among the convolutions of fluffy white clouds ; was looping earthward in great, invisible volutes ; catching himself on the upward curve and zigzagging away again, swimming ecstatically the high, clean air currents which the poor, crawling, earth-bound ones never know.

Johnny jarred back to earth and to the sordid realities of life. He had ridden half-way to Sinkhole without knowing it, and now his horse had stopped, facing another horse whose rider was staring curiously at Johnny. This was Pete, on his way in from Sinkhole.

" Say-y ! Yuh snake-bit, or what ? " Pete asked. " Ridin' glassy-eyed right *at* a feller ! If my hawse had been a mite shorter, I expect you'd of rode right on over me and never of saw me. What's bitin' yuh, Johnny ? "

" Me ? Nothing ! " No day-dreamer likes being pulled out of his dream by so ugly a reality as Pete, and Johnny was petulant. " Why didn't you get

outa the way, then? You saw me coming, didn't you?"

"Me? Sure! I ain't *loco*. I seen yuh five mile back, about. I knowed it was somebody from the ranch. Sudden 'phoned in and said I could drag it. And you can bet yore sweet young life I hailed them words with joy! What yuh done to 'im that he's sendin' yuh off down to Sinkhole? Me, I 'phoned in and much as told 'em he'd have to double my pay if he wanted me to stay down there any longer. That was a coupla days ago. Didn't git no satisfaction at all till to-day. Me, I'd ruther go to jail, twicet over, than stay here a week longer. Ain't saw a soul in two weeks down there. Well, I'll be pushin' along. Adios—and here's hopin' you like it better than what I done."

Johnny told him good-bye and straightway forgot him. Once he had his two horses "lined out" in their shuffling little trail-trot that was their natural gait he picked up his dream where he had been interrupted. Where his body went mattered little to Johnny Jewel, so long as he was left alone with his thoughts. So presently his eyes were once more staring vacantly at the dim trail, while in spirit he was soaring high and swooping downward with the ease of a desert lark, while thousands thrilled to watch his flight.

What did he care about Sinkhole Camp? Loneliness meant long, uninterrupted hours in which to ride and read and dream of the great things he meant some day to do.

CHAPTER IV

A THING THAT SETS LIKE A HAWK

SIX days are not many when they are lived with companions and the numberless details of one's everyday occupation. They may seem a month if you pass them in jail, or in waiting for some great event—or at Sinkhole Camp, down near the Border.

Three days of the six Johnny spent in familiarizing himself with the two or three detached horse herds that watered along the meagre little stream that sunk finally under a ledge and was seen no more in Arizona. He counted the horses as best he could while they loitered at their watering places, and he noticed where they fed habitually—also that they ranged far and usually came in to water in the late afternoon or closer to dusk, when the yellow-jackets that swarmed along the muddy banks of the stream did not worry them so much, nor the flies that were a torment.

He reported by telephone to his employer, who seemed relieved to know that everything was so quiet and untroubled down at that end of his range. And once, quite inadvertently, he reported to Mary V; or was going to, when he recognized a feminine note in the masculine gruffness that spoke over the wire. And when she found he had discovered her:

"Oh, Johnny! I've thought of another verse!" she began animatedly.

Johnny hung up, and although the telephone rang twice after that he would not answer. It seemed to him that Mary V had very little to do, harping away still at that subject. He had been secretly a bit homesick for the ranch, but now he thanked heaven, emphatically enough to make up for any lack of sincerity, that he was where he was.

He got out his aviation circulars again and went over them one by one, though he could almost repeat them with his eyes shut. He tried to dream of future greatness, but instead he could only feel depressed and hopeless. It would take a long, long time to save enough money to learn the game. And the earning was dreary work at best. The little adobe cabin became straightway a squalid prison, the monotonous waste around him a void that spread like a great, impassable gulf between himself and the dreams he dreamed. He wished, fervently and profanely, that the greasers would try to steal some horses, so that he could be doing something.

People thought the Border was a tumultuous belt of violence drawn from Coast to Gulf, he meditated morosely. They ought to camp at Sinkhole for awhile. Why, he could ride in an hour or two to Mexico—and see nothing more than he could see from the door of his cabin. He wished he could see something. A fight—anything that had action in it. But the revolution, boiling intermittently over there, did not so much as float a wisp of steam in his direction.

He wished that he had not "hung up" on Mary V before he had told her a few things. He couldn't see why she didn't leave him alone. The Lord knew he was willing to leave *her* alone.

A few days more of that he had before he saw a living soul. Then a Mexican youth came wandering in on a scrawny pony that seemed to have its heart set on drinking the creek dry before his rider could drink it all. Johnny watched the boy lie down on the flat of his lean stomach with his face to the sluggish stream, and drink as if he, too, were trying to cheat the pony. Together they lifted their heads and looked at Johnny. The Mexican boy smiled, white-toothed, while deep pools of eyes regarded Johnny soberly.

"She's damn hot to-day, señor," he said. "Thank you for the so good water to drink."

"That's all right. Help yourself," Johnny said languidly. "Had your dinner?"

"Not this day. I'm come from Tucker Bly, his rancho. I ride to see if horses feed quiet."

"Well, come in and eat. I cooked some peaches this morning."

The youth went eagerly, his somewhat stilted English easing off into a mixture of good American slang and the Mexican dialect spoken by peons and some a grade higher up the ladder. He was not more than seventeen, and while Johnny recalled his instructions to put any greaser on the run, he took the liberty of interpreting those instructions to please himself. This kid was harmless enough. He talked the range gossip that proved to Johnny's satisfaction that he was what he professed to be—a young rider for Tucker Bly, who owned the "Forty-Seven" brand that ranged just east of the Rolling R. Johnny had never seen this Tomaso—plain Tom, he called him presently—but he knew Tucker Bly; and a few leading questions served to set at rest any incipient suspicions Johnny may have had.

They were doing the same work, he and Tomaso.

The only difference was that Johnny camped alone, and Tomaso rode out from the Forty-Seven ranch every day, taking whatever direction Tucker Bly might choose for him. But the freemasonry of the range land held Johnny to the feeling that there was a common bond between them, in spite of Tomaso's swarthy skin. Besides, he was lonely. His tongue loosened while Tomaso ate and praised Johnny's cookery with the innate flattery of his race.

"Wha's that pic'shur? What you call that thing?" Tomaso pointed a slender brown finger at a circular heading, whereon a pink aeroplane did a "nose dive" toward the date line through voluted blue clouds.

"That? Say! Didn't you ever see a flying machine?" Johnny stared at him pityingly.

Tomaso shook his head vaguely. "Me, I'm never saw one of them things. My brother, he's tell me. He knows the spot were there's one fell down. My brother, he says she's awful bad luck, them thing. This-a one, she's fell 'cross the line. She's set there like a big hawk, my brother says. Nobody wants. She's bad luck."

"Bad luck nothing." Johnny's eyes had widened a bit. "What you mean, one fell across the line? You don't mean—say what'n thunder *do* yuh mean? Where's there a flying machine setting like a hawk?"

Tomaso waved a brown hand comprehensively from east to west. "Somewhere—me, I dunno. My brother, he's know. He's saw it set there. It's what them soldiers got lost. It's bad luck. Them soldiers most dead when somebody find. They don't know where that thing is no more. They don't want it no more. My brother, she's tol' me them soldiers flew like birds and then they fell down.

It's bad luck. My brother took one hammer from that thing, and one pliers. Them hammer, she's take a nail off my brother's thumb. And them pliers, she's lost right away."

Johnny's hand trembled when he tried to shake a little tobacco into a cigarette paper. His lips, too, quivered slightly. But he laughed unbelievingly.

"Your brother was kidding you, Tom. Nobody would go off and leave an aeroplane setting in the desert. Those soldiers that got lost were away over east of here. Three or four hundred miles. He was kidding you."

"No-o, my brother, she's saw that thing! She's hunt cattle what got across, and she's saw that what them soldiers flew. Me, I *know*." He looked at Johnny appraisingly, hesitated and leaned forward, impelled yet not quite daring to give the proof.

"Well, what do you know?" Johnny returned the look steadfastly.

"You don't tell my brother—I——" He fumbled in his trousers pocket, hesitated a little longer, and grew more trustful. "Them pliers—I'm got."

He laid them on the table, and Johnny let his stool tilt forward abruptly on its four legs. He took up the pliers, examined them with one eye squinted against the smoke of his cigarette, weighed them in his hand, bent to read the trade-mark. Then he looked at Tomaso. Those pliers may or may not have come from the emergency kit of an aeroplane, but they certainly were not of the kind or quality that ranchmen were in the habit of owning. To Johnny they looked convincing. When he had an aeroplane of his own, he would find a hundred uses for a pair of pliers exactly like those.

"I thought you said your brother lost 'em," he observed drily.

Tomaso shrugged, flung out his hands, smiled with his lips, and frowned with his eyes. "S-pose he did lost. Somebody could find."

Johnny laughed. "All right; we'll let it ride that way. I ain't going to tell your brother. Want to sell 'em?"

Tomaso took up the pliers, caressed their bright steel with his long fingers, nipped them open and shut.

"What you pay me?" he countered.

"Two bits."

Tomaso turned them over, gazed upon them fondly. He shook his head regretfully. "*No quero*. Them pliers, she's *bueno*," he said. "You could find more things. My brother, she's tell lots of things is where that sets like a hawk. Lots of things. You don't tell my brother?"

"Sure not. I don't want the things anyway. And I don't know your brother."

Tomaso thoughtfully nipped the pliers upon the oilcloth table cover. He looked at the aeroplane picture, he looked at Johnny, He sighed.

"Me, I'm like see those thing fly like birds. I'm like see that what sets over there. My brother, she's tell me it's so big like here to that water hole. She's tell me some day it maybe flies. I go see it some day."

Johnny laughed. "You'll have some trip if you do. You take it from me, Tom, I don't know your brother, but I know he was kiddin' you. It was away over east of here that those fellows got lost."

After Tomaso had mounted reluctantly and ridden away, however, Johnny discovered himself faced southward, staring off toward Mexico. It was just a yarn, about that aeroplane over there. Of course there was nothing in it—nothing whatever.

He didn't believe for a minute that an aeroplane was sitting like a hawk on the sands a few miles to the south of him. He didn't believe it—but he pictured to himself just how it would look, and he played a little with the idea. It was something new to think about, and Johnny straightway built himself a dream around it.

Riding the ridges in the lesser heat of the early mornings, his physical eyes looked out over the meagre range, spying out the scattered horse herds grazing afar, their backs just showing above the brush. Behind his eyes his mind roved farther, visioning a military plane sitting, inert but with potentialities that sent his mind dizzy, on the hot sand of Mexico—so close that he could almost see the place where it sat.

This was splendid food for Johnny's imagination, for his ambitions even, though it was not particularly good for the Rolling R. He was not bothered much. Evenings, the foreman or Sudden would usually call him up and ask him how things were. Johnny would say that everything was all right, and had the stage driver made a mistake and left any of his mail at the ranch? Because he had been to the mail box on the trail and there was nothing there. The speaker at the ranch would assure him that nothing had been left there for him, and the ceremony would be over.

Johnny was fussy about his mail. He had spent twenty-five dollars for a correspondence course in aviation, and he wanted to begin studying. He did not know how he could learn to fly by mail, but he was a trustful youth in some ways—he left that for the school to solve for him.

Tomaso rode over again in a few days. This time he had a mysterious looking kind of wrench in his

pocket, and he showed it to Johnny with a glimmer of triumph.

"Me, I'm saw that thing what flies; Only now it sets. It's got wheels in front—little small wheels. Dos—two. My brother, he's show me. I'm find thees wranch. It's got wings out, so." Tomaso spread his two arms. "Some day, I'm think she's fly. When wind blows."

Johnny felt a little tremor go over him, but he managed to laugh. "All right; you've been looking at the pictures. If you saw it, tell me about it. What makes it go?"

Tomaso shook his head. "She don't go," he said. "She sets."

"All right. She sets, then. What on—back of the wheels? You said two wheels in front. What holds up the back?"

"One small, little leg like my arm," Tomaso answered unhesitatingly. "Like my arm and my hand—so. Iron."

Johnny's eyes widened a trifle, but he would not yield. "Well, where do men ride on it? On which wing?"

"Men don't," Tomaso contradicted solemnly. "Men sets down like in little, small boat. Me, I'm set there. With wheel for drive like automobile. With engine like automobile. My brother, she's try starting that engine. She's don't go. Got no crank nowhere. She's got no gas. Me, I'm scare my brother starts that engine. I'm jomp down like hell. I'm scare I maybe would fly somewhere and fall down and keel. *No importa*. She's jus' sets."

Johnny turned white around the mouth, but he shook his head. "Pretty good, Tommy. But you better look out. If there's a flying machine over there, it belongs to the Government. You better

leave it alone. There's other folks know about it, and maybe watching it."

Tomaso shook his head violently. "*Por dios*, my brother she's fin' out about that," he said. "She's don't tell nobody, only me. She's fin' out them *hombres* what ride that theeng, they go *loco* for walking too much in sand and don't get no water. Them *hombres*, they awful sick, they don't know where is that thing what flies. My brother, she's fin' out that thing sets in Mexico, belongs Mexico. Thees countree los'. Jus' like ship what's los' on ocean, my brother she's tell from writing. My brother, she's smart *hombre*. She's keep awful quiet, tell nobody. She's theenk sell that thing for flying."

"Huh!" Johnny grunted. "What you telling me about it for? Your brother'd skin yuh alive if he caught you blabbing it all out to me."

Tomaso looked a little scared and uneasy. He dropped his eyes and began poking a hole in the sand with his toe. Then he looked up very candidly into Johnny's face.

"Me, I'm awful lonesome," he explained. "I'm riding here and I'm see you jus' like friend. You boy like me. You got picshurs them thing what flies. You tell me you don't say nothing for my brother when I'm tell you that things sets over there." He waved a dirty brown hand to the southward. "Me, I'm *trus'* you. Tha's secret what I'm tell. You don't tell no-*body*. You promise?"

"All right. I promise." Very gravely Johnny made the sign of the cross over his heart.

Tomaso's eyes lightened at that. More gravely than Johnny he crossed himself—forehead, lips, breast. He murmured a solemn oath in Spanish, and afterwards put out his hand to shake, American fashion. All this impressed Johnny more than had

he detailed description of the thing which sat. If he still laughed at the story, his laugh was not particularly convincing. Nor was his jibing tone when he called after Tomaso when that youth was iding away :

" Tell your brother I might buy his flying machine —if he'll sell it cheap ! "

CHAPTER V

DESERT GLIMPSES

MARY V was indefatigably pursuing a new and apparently fascinating avocation, for which her mother expressed little sympathy, no enthusiasm whatever, and a grudgingly given consent. Mary V was making a collection of Desert Glimpses for educational purposes at her boarding school. She had long been urged to do so by her schoolmates and teachers, she told her mother, and now she was going to do it. It should be the very best, most complete collection anyone could possibly make within riding distance of the Rolling R. Incidentally she meant to collect jack-rabbit ears and rattlesnake rattles, for the purpose of thrilling the girls, but she did not tell her mother that. Neither did she tell her mother just why her quest always lay to the southward when there was plenty of desert to be glimpsed toward the north and to the east and the west. She did not even tell herself why she did that.

So Mary V, knowing well the terrific heat she would have to face in the middle of the day, ordered her horse saddled when the boys saddled their own —which was about sunrise. She did not keep it standing more than half an hour or so before she came out and mounted him. She was well equipped

or her enterprise. She carried a camera, three xtra rolls of film, a telescoped tripod which she tied nder her right stirrup leather, a pair of high-power Jusch glasses (to glimpse with, probably), two duck-overed canteens filled and dripping, a generous unch of sandwiches and cake and sour pickles, a box agazine ·22 rifle, a knife, a tube of cold cream rapped in a bit of cheesecloth, and a very compact et very complete vanity case. Jostling the vanity ase in her saddle pocket were two boxes of soft-nose 22-long cartridges for the rifle. Furthermore, for ecial personal protection she had an extremely usinesslike six-shooter which she carried in a shoul-er holster under her riding shirt ; a concession to er father, who had made her promise never to ride vay from the ranch without it.

For apparel Mary V wore a checked riding coat nd breeches, together with black puttees. The suit ad grown a bit shabby for Los Angeles, and Mary 's mother believed that town cast-offs should be orn out on the ranch. Mary V did not mind. She ated the cumbersome riding skirts of the range girl roper, and much preferred the breeches. When e had put a little distance between herself and the nch, she usually removed the coat and tied it in a ll behind the cantle. She looked then like a slim y—or she would have, except for the hat. Mary cherished her complexion, which Arizona sun and nds would have burned a brick red. In cool eather she wore a Stetson like the boys ; but now e favoured a great straw sombrero such as you see ction hands wear along the railroad track in Ari-na. To keep it on her head in the winds she had sorted to tying a ribbon down over the brim from e front of the crown to the nape of her neck ; and ing another ribbon from the back of the crown

down under her chin. Thus doubly anchored, and skewered with two hatpins besides, the hat might be counted upon to give Mary V no trouble, but a great deal of protection. Worn with the checked riding breeches and the heavy black puttees, it was not particularly becoming, but Mary V did not expect to meet many pairs of critical eyes. Rolling R boys were too much like home folks to bother about, having been accustomed to seeing Mary V in strange and various guises since she was a tiny tot.

Southward she rode, and as swiftly as was wise if she valued the well-being of her horse. Movies will have it that nothing short of a gallop is tolerated by riders in the West; whereas Mary V had been taught from her childhood up that she must never "run" her horse unless there was need of it. She therefore contented herself with ambling along the trail at a distance-devouring trail-trot, slowing her horse to a walk on the rising slopes and urging him a little with her spurred heels on the levels. She did not let him lag—she could not, if she covered the distance she had in her mind to cover.

Away over to the south—almost to Sinkhole Camp, in fact—was a ridge that was climbable on horseback. Not every ridge in that country was, and Mary V was not fond of walking in the sand on a hot day. The ridge commanded a far view, and was said to be a metropolis among the snakes that populated the region. Mary V had, very casually, mentioned to the boys that some day she meant to get a good picture of a snake den. She said "the girls" did not believe that snakes went in bunches, and writhed amicably together in their dens. She was going to prove it to them.

A perfectly logical quest it was therefore that led her toward that ridge. You could not blame Mary V

if the view from the top of it extended to Sinkhole Camp and beyond. She had not made the view, remember, nor had she advised the snakes to choose that ridge for their dens. She was not even perfectly sure that they did choose it. The boys had told her that Black Ridge was " full up " with snake dens, and she meant to see if they told the truth.

Wherefore her horse Tango laboriously carried Mary V up the ridge, and kept his ears perked for the warning buzz of rattlers, and his eyes open for a feasible line retreat in case he heard one. Tango knew just as well as Mary V when they were in snake country. He had gone so far as to argue the point of climbing that ridge, but as usual Mary V's argument was stronger than Tango's, and he had yielded with an injured air that was quite lost upon his rider. Mary V was thinking of something else.

They reached the top without having seen a single snake. Tango seemed somewhat surprised at this, but Mary V was not. Mary V thought it was too hot even for rattlesnakes, and as for the dearth of lizards—well, she supposed the snakes had eaten them all. She had let Tango stop often to breathe, and whenever he did so she had looked south, scanning as much of the lower level as she could see, which was not the proper way to go about hunting snake dens, I assure you. But at the top she permitted Tango to walk into the shade of a boulder that radiated heat like a stove but was still preferable to the blistering sunlight, and there she left him while she walked a little nearer the edge of the rimrock that topped the ridge on its southern side.

Once more she scanned the sweltering expanse of sage brush, scant grass, many rock patches and much sand. She saw a rider moving along a shallow watercourse, and immediately she focussed her

glasses upon him. She gave an ejaculation of surprise when the powerful lenses annihilated nine-tenths of the distance between them. One would judge from her manner and her tone that, while she had not been surprised to see a rider, that rider's identity was wholly unexpected.

She watched him until, having reached a certain place where a group of cottonwoods shaded the gully, he stopped and dismounted to fuss with his cinches. Mary V could not be sure whether he was merely killing time, or whether he really needed to tighten the saddle; but when another rider appeared suddenly from the eastward, she did know that the first rider showed no symptoms of surprise.

She did not know the second arrival at the cottonwoods. She could see that he was Mexican, and that was all. The two talked together with much gesturing on the part of the Mexican, and sundry affirmative nods on the part of the first rider. The Mexican frequently waved a hand toward the south —toward Sinkhole Camp, perhaps. They seemed to be in a hurry, Mary V thought. They did not tarry more than five minutes before they parted, the Mexican riding back toward the east, the first rider returning westward. He had come cautiously, at an easy pace. He went back riding at a long lope, as though time was precious to him.

Mary V watched until she saw him emerge out of that hollow and duck into another which led toward the north-west and, if he followed it, would bring him out near the head of Dry Gulch, which was several miles nearer the Rolling R home ranch than was the ridge where she stood. When he had gone, she turned again to see where the Mexican was going. The Mexican, she discovered, was going east as fast as his horse could carry him without dropping dead

in that heat; and he, also, was keeping to the hollows.

"Here's a pretty howdy-do!" said Mary V to the palpitating atmosphere. "I'm just going to tell dad about Tex sneaking away down here to meet Mexicans and things on the sly! I never did like that Tex. I don't like his eyes. You can't see into them at all. I'll bet they're framing up something on Johnny Jewel—they were pointing right toward his camp. There's no telling *what* they're up to! I'm going right and tell dad——"

But she couldn't. Mary V knew she couldn't. In the first place, her dad would ask her what she was doing on Black Ridge, which was far beyond her permitted range of activities. Her dad would foolishly maintain that she could glimpse all the desert necessary without going that far from the ranch. In the second place, he would probably tell her that he was paying Tex to ride the range and, if he met a Mexican, it was his business to send that same Mexican back where he came from. In the third place, he would think she was riding over there for a reason which was untrue and very, very unjust. And he wouldn't fire Tex, because Tex was a good "hand," and hands were hard to find. He would simply make her promise to stay at home.

"He'd say it was perfectly all right for Tex—and perfectly all wrong for me. Dad's *tremendously* pin-headed where I am concerned. So I suppose I'll just have to say nothing, and ride all that long way in the hot sun to make sure that horrid Johnny Jewel is not being murdered or something. It doesn't, of course, concern me personally at all—but dad is *so* short-handed this summer. And he actually *threatened* that he couldn't afford me a new car this winter if wages go up or horses go down, or

anything happens that doesn't just please him. And I suppose Johnny Jewel has his uses, in the general scheme of dad's business, so even if he is a mean, conceited little shrimp personally, I'll have to go and make sure he isn't killed, because it would be just like dad to call that bad luck and grouch around and not get me the car."

Mary V had barely reached this goal of personal unconcern for anything but her own private interests, when Tango began to manifest certain violent symptoms of having seen or heard something very disagreeable. Mary V had to take some long, boyish steps in order to snatch his reins before he bolted and left her afoot, which would have been a real calamity. But she caught him, scolded him shrewishly and slapped his cheek until he backed from her wall-eyed, and then she mounted him and went clattering down off the ridge without having seen any snake dens at all. Doubtless the boys had lied to her, as usual.

To Sinkhole Camp was a long way, much longer than it had looked from the top of Black Ridge. Mary V, her face red with heat, hurried on and on, wishing over and over that she had never started at all, but lacking the resolution to turn back. Yet she was considered a very resolute young woman by those who knew her most intimately.

Perversely she blamed Johnny Jewel for putting her to all this trouble and discomfort, and for interrupting her in her work of getting Desert Glimpses. She repeatedly told herself that he would not even have the common human instinct to feel grateful toward her for riding away down there to see if he were murdered.

She was right in that conjecture, at least. When she rode up to the squat adobe cabin, somewhere near

noon, she found Johnny Jewel stretched morosely on his back, staring up at the low roof and thinking the gloomiest thoughts which a lonesome young man of twenty-one or two may conjure from a fit of the blues. That he was not murdered or even menaced with any danger seemed to Mary V a personal grievance against herself after that terrifically hot ride.

Johnny turned a gloomy glance upon her when she walked in and sat down limply on the one chair in the cabin ; but he did not show any keen pleasure in her presence, nor any gratitude.

" Well ! You're still alive then ! " she said rather crossly.

" I guess I am. Why ? " Johnny, his meditations disturbed by her coming, rose languidly and sat upon the side of his bunk, slouched forward with his arms resting across his strong young legs and his glance inclined to the floor.

" Oh, nothing." Mary V took off her hat, but she was too fagged to fan herself with it. Her one emotion, at that moment, was an overwhelming regret that she had come. If Johnny Jewel had the nerve to think that she wanted to see *him*——

" You must love the sun," Johnny observed apathetically. " Lizards, even, have got sense enough to stay in the shade such weather as this." He rumpled his hair to let the faint breeze in to his scalp, and looked at her. " You're red as a pickled beet at a picnic," he told her ungraciously.

Mary V pulled together her lagging wits, marshalled her fighting forces, and flaunted a war banner in the shape of a smile that was demure.

" Well, one must expect to make some sacrifices when one is working in a good cause," she replied amiably, and paused.

" Yeh ? " Johnny's eyes lost a little of their dull-

ness. It is possible that he recognized that war banner of hers. "One didn't expect to see one down here—on a good cause."

"No? Well, you do see one, nevertheless. One is at work on an exhibit for one's school, you see. Each of us girls was assigned a subject for vacation work. Mine is 'Desert Glimpses'—a collection of pictures, curios and so on, representing points of interest in the desert country. I've a horned toad at home, and a blue-tailed lizard, and some pictures of jack-rabbits, with their ears attached to the frame, and quite a few rattlesnake rattles. So to-day," she smiled again at him, "I rode down here to take a picture of you!"

"Thanks," said Johnny, apparently unmoved. "I didn't know I was a point of interest in your eyes; but seeing I am, I'm willing the girls should have a picture of me framed. If you'll go out and sit in the shade of the shack while I shave and doll up a little you may take a picture. And I'll autograph it for you. Five years from now," he went on complacently, "you're going to brag about having it in your possession. One of those I-knew-him-when kind of brags. And if you'll bring the girls around some time when I'm pulling off an exhibition flight I'll let 'em shake hands with me."

"Well, of all the conceit!" By that one futile phrase Mary V owned herself defeated in the first charge. "Of all——"

"Conceit? Nothing like that! When you thought it was a good cause to ride all these miles on the hottest day of the year, just to get my picture——" Johnny smirked at her in a perfectly maddening way. He knew it was maddening to Mary V, for he had meant it to be so.

"I did not!" Mary V's face could not be any

redder than the heat had made it, but even so one could see the rise in her mental temperature.

"You said you did."

"Well—I merely want your picture to put with my collection of donkeys! You——"

"You said points of interest," Johnny reminded her. He had lost all his moroseness in the interest of the conversation. He had forgotten what a tonic his word-battles with Mary V could furnish. "You better stick to it, because it will sure pan out that way. You'll hate to admit, five years from now, that you once took me for a donkey. Besides, you can't have my ears to pin to the frame; I'll need 'em to listen to all the nice things some *real* girls will be saying to me when I've just made an exhibition flight."

"Exhibition flight—of your imagination!" jeered Mary V, curling her lip at him. "And I won't need your ears to prove you're a donkey, so don't worry about that."

Johnny Jewel stood up, lifted his arms high above his head to stretch his healthy young muscles, pulled his face all askew in a yawn, rumpled his hair again and reached for his papers and tobacco. He knew that Mary V never noticed or cared if a fellow smoked; she was too thoroughly range-bred for that affectation.

"Good golly! Things must sure be dull at the ranch, if you had to ride twenty miles on a day like this to pick a fight with me," he observed, leisurely singling one leaf out of his book of papers. "Left your horse to bake in the sun, too, I suppose, while you practise the art of persiflage on me."

He finished rolling his cigarette, languidly helped himself to a match from a box on the wide window ledge near him, and sauntered to the door—with a

slanting, downward glance at Mary V as he passed her. A little smile lurked at the corners of his lips now that his face was not visible to her. Mary V was studying her wrist watch as though it was vital that she knew the time down to the last second. He judged that she had no retort ready for him, so he picked up his hat and went out into the glaring sunlight.

Tango was sweating patiently under the scant shelter of the eaves, switching at flies and trying to doze. Johnny led him down to the creek and gave him about half as much water as he wanted, then took him to the corral and unsaddled him under the brush shed that sheltered his own horse from the worst of the heat. Whatever her mood and whatever her errand, he guessed shrewdly that Mary V would not be anxious to leave for home until the midday fierceness of the heat was past ; and even if she were anxious, common sense and some mercy for her horse would restrain her.

Johnny did not confess to himself that he was glad to see Mary V, but it is a fact that his deep gloom had for some reason disappeared, and that he even whistled under his breath while he untied her lunch and camera and took them back with him to the cabin.

Mary V had been calmly inspecting his new Correspondence Course in the Art of Flying, the first lessons of which had arrived at Johnny's mail box a few days before. She seemed much amused, and she registered her amusement in certain marginal notes as she read. At the top of the first lesson she drew a fairly clever cartoon of Johnny in an aeroplane, ascending to the star Venus. She made it appear that Johnny's hair stood straight on end and his eyes goggled with fear, and she made Venus a

long-nosed, skinny, old-maid face with a wide, welcoming simper. Up in a corner she placed the moon, with one eye closed and a twisted grin.

On the blank space at the end of the first lesson she wrote the following—and could scarcely refrain from calling Johnny's attention to it, she was so proud of it:

Skyrider, Skyrider, where have you been?
I've been to see Venus, which made the moon grin.
Skyrider, Skyrider, what saw you there?
I saw old maid Venus a-dyeing her hair!

Having through much industry accomplished all this while Johnny was putting up her horse, Mary V slid the revised lesson out of sight under other papers and was almost decently civil to Johnny when he returned. She did not help him with dinner—which was served cold for obvious reasons—but she divided her sandwiches and sour pickles with him in return for a fried rabbit leg and a dish of stewed fruit. In the intervals of their quarrelling, which continued intermittently all the while she was there, Mary V quizzed him about his ambition to fly. Did he really intend to learn "the game"? Had he ever been up in a flying machine? It seemed that Johnny had made two ecstatic trips into the air—for a price—at the San Francisco Fair the autumn before, and that his imagination had never quite felt solid ground under it since! Where—or how—could he learn?

If she were secretly trying to inveigle Johnny into showing her his new Correspondence Course, so that she might be a gleeful witness when he discovered her additions and revisions, she must have been a greatly disappointed young woman. For Johnny that day demonstrated how well he could keep a secret. He warmed to her apparent interest in his

chosen profession, but he did not once hint at the lessons, and kept rigidly to generalities.

Mary V mentally called him sly and deceitful, and started another quarrel over nothing. While this particular battle was raging, there came an interruption which Mary V first considered sinister, then peculiar, and at last, after much cogitation, extremely suspicious and a further evidence of Johnny's slyness.

A Mexican rode up to the doorway, coming from the east. Not Tomaso, who would have convinced even Mary V of his harmlessness, but a broad-shouldered, square-faced man with squinty eyes, a constant smile, and only a slight accent.

Johnny went to the door, plainly hesitating over the common little courtesy of inviting him in. The man dismounted, announced that he was Tomaso's brother, and then caught sight of Mary V inside and staring out at him curiously.

His manner changed a little. Even Mary V could see that. He stopped where he was, squinting into the cabin, smiling still.

"I come to borrow one, two matches, señor, if you have to spare," he said glibly. "Me, I'm riding past this way, and stop for my horse to drink. She's awful hot to-day—yes?"

Johnny gave him the matches, made what replies were needful, and stood in the doorway watching the fellow ride to the creek and afterwards proceed to eliminate himself from the landscape. Mary V leaned sidewise so that she too could watch him from where she sat at the table. She was sure, when she saw him ride off, that he was the same man who had met Tex away back there in the arroyo.

She watched Johnny, wondering if he knew the man, or knew what was his real reason for coming. Whatever his real reason was, he had gone off with-

out stating it, and Mary V believed that he had gone because she was there. She wished she knew why he had come, but she would not ask Johnny. She merely watched him covertly.

Johnny had turned thoughtful. He did not even see that Mary V was watching him, he was so busy wishing that she had not come at all, or that she had gone before this man rode up. Inwardly Johnny was all a-quiver with excitement. He believed that he knew why Tomaso's brother had come.

CHAPTER VI

SALVAGE

THE brother of Tomaso came back. Mary V, cannily watching the wide waste behind her as she rode homeward, saw him and made sure of him through her glasses. The brother of Tomaso seemed to be in a hurry, and he seemed to have been waiting in some convenient covert until she had left. His horse was trotting too nimbly through the sage to have come far at that pace. Mary V could tell a tired horse as far as she could tell that it was a horse.

She did not turn back, for the simple reason that she knew very well her mother would have all the boys out hunting her if she failed to reach home by sundown. That would have meant deep humiliation for Mary V and a curtailment of future freedom. So she put up her glasses and went her way, talking to herself by way of comforting her thwarted curiosity, and accusing Johnny Jewel of all sorts of intrigues; and never dreaming the truth, of course.

"Me, I'm willing to sell, all right. What you pay me?" Tomaso's brother was sitting in Johnny's doorway where he could watch the trail, and he was smoking a cigarette made with Johnny's tobacco. "She's no good to nobody, setting there in the sand, but she's all right, you bet, for fly. Them fellers,

they get lost, I think. They get away off there, and no gas to fly back. No place to buy none, you bet." He grinned sardonically up at Johnny, who was leaning against the adobe wall. "They get the big scare, you bet. They take all the water, and they walk and walk, drink the water and walk and walk and walk—loco, that's what. Don't know where they go, don't know where they come from, don't know nothin' no more atall. So that flyin' machine, that's lost. Me, I find out. It don't belong to nobody no more only just the feller that finds. Me, I take you there, I show you. You see I'm telling the truth, all right, You pay me half. I help you drag it over here to your camp, all right. You pay me other half. That's right way to fix him—yes?"

"Sounds fair enough, far as that goes," Johnny's voice had the huskiness of suppressed excitement. The cigarette he was studying so critically quivered in his fingers like a twig in the wind. "But the thing must belong to *somebody*."

"No, I'm find out from lawyer. Only I'm say maybe it's automobile. Cos' me fi' dollar, which is hold-up, you bet. Some day I get even that fi' dollar. That flyin' machine goes into Mexico, that's los' by law. Sal—what you call—oh!" He snapped his fingers as men do when trying to recall a word. "She cos' me fi' dollar, that word! Jus' minute—it's like wreck on ocean, that is left and somebody brings it——"

"Salvage?" Johnny jerked the word out abruptly.

"That's him! Salvage. Belongs anybody that finds. Mexico, she's foreign countree. She could take; it's hers if she want. But what she wants? Nobody can make it go. No Mexicans can fly, you bet. Me, I don't know damn t'ing about flyin' nothin'

but monee. Monee, I make it fly, yes." He chuckled at his little joke, but Johnny did not even hear it.

Johnny was seeing a real, military aeroplane in his possession, cached away in some niche in the lava wall to the west of Sinkhole—a wall that featured queer niches and caverns and clefts. He was seeing —what wonderful things was Johnny not seeing?

"Like them buried treasure," Tomaso's brother went on purring comfortably to Johnny's doubts. "The *hombre* what finds, it belongs to him, you bet. What you say? You pay me——" The eyes of Tomaso's brother dwelt calculatingly upon Johnny's half-averted face. "You pay me fifty dollar when I show you I don't lie. I help you drag him back home, you——"

"Nothing doing." Johnny pulled himself from his dreams to bargain for his heart's desire—because he knew Mexicans. "I ain't sure I want the thing, anyway. It's probably broke, and it takes *money* to fix a busted plane, let me tell you. And there might be complications; and besides, I've got to ride this range. I can't go rambling around all over Mexico hunting an aeroplane that probably wouldn't be any good when I found it."

Tomaso's brother rose from the doorsill to gesticulate while he argued those points and others which Johnny thought of later. It was a beautiful flying machine. By every object impressive enough to make oath upon, Tomaso's brother swore that it was as he said. Look! Not one peso would he accept until Johnny had seen. And the range? Would it run off in two days, perhaps? Look, then! Tomaso's brother would make the bet. He would agree. They would go for the airship, and they would return with it, and of the fifty pesos that was the full price he asked, not one centavo would he

accept until the señor had seen that all was as he had left it. Look! That very night they would go, and by noon to-morrow they would be there. And under the great wings would they rest. And they would return in two more days—such a little while it would take——

Johnny's jaw lengthened. Making due allowance for the lying tongue of Tomaso's brother, it would take a week to get the thing home. And that would mean that Johnny would have no job when he returned; which would mean that he would have no fifty dollars a month coming in; which would mean that he would be broke and would have to hunt another job. And you couldn't pack a Government aeroplane around under your arm. Not once did it occur to Johnny that he might sell it for more money than he had ever possessed in his life, for more than what a full course in aviation would cost him. As his own precious plane he saw it. His to keep. His to fly, his to worship—but never to sell.

He looked away to the southward where the land stretched grey and dreary to the low skyline broken here and there with the pale outline of distant hills. A night and half a day of riding to take them there, and an aeroplane to haul back through brush and rock maybe, and across draws and gulches—Good Lord! The thing might almost as well be in Honolulu!

"But the desert places—me, I'm making the plan how it can be brought across the sand, with little brush to cut away." Tomaso's brother began arguing away his unspoken fears. "We fix that, you bet! Two days, that's all. You got strong, good fence; horses, they don't go away in such little time, you bet!"

Johnny stood irresolute, tempted, weakly trying to beat back the temptation while he hugged it to his soul.

"Why don't you—" Johnny was on the point of asking Tomaso's brother why he didn't sell it to the Government, but he shut his teeth on the words. Tomaso's brother evidently had not thought of that; and why put the idea into his head? "Why don't you and Tomaso go after it and bring it here? Then if it's all right, I might buy it—for fifty dollars. I can give you a cheque on the Arizona State Bank in Tucson."

Tomaso's brother shrugged his shoulders in true Mexican eloquence. "That puts me all the troubles for notheeng, maybe. Maybe you say she's no good —what I'm going to do? Not drag it back for notheeng? Not leave her set here for notheeng." He shrugged again with an air of finality that sent a shiver over Johnny's nerves. "Twenty-fi' dollar when you look at her and say she's all right. Twenty fi' dollar when she's here. That suits me. It don't suit you, *no importa*."

It did matter, though. It mattered a great deal to Johnny, hard as he tried to hide the fact.

"Well, I'll think about it. I'd have to ride fence first, anyway, and make sure everything's all right. And you'd have to tell Tomaso to drift over this way and kinda keep an eye out. I—you come back to-morrow. If I take the offer at all, which I ain't sure of, we can start to-morrow night. But I'm not making any promises. It's a gamble; I've got to think it over first."

In that way did Johnny invite temptation to tarry with him and wax stronger while it fed on his resistance, while thinking that he was being very firm and businesslike and cautious, and that he was in no danger whatever of yielding unless his reason thoroughly approved.

His manner of thinking it over calmly was rather

pathetic. It consisted of building anew his air castle, and in riding out to the forbidden lava ridge that rose like a wall out of the sandy plain west of Sinkhole to choose the niche which might best be converted into a secret hangar. Since first he heard of the derelict aeroplane his mind had several times strayed toward those deep clefts, but his feet had heretofore refrained from following his thoughts.

Niches there were many, but they were too prone to yawn wide-mouthed at the world, so that whatever treasure they might have contained would be revealed to any chance passer-by. These Johnny disdained without a second glance. Others he investigated by riding in a little way, sending a glance around and riding out again.

Just before dusk, as he was returning disappointedly after looking as far as was practicable, his horse Sandy swung into one of the open-mouthed depressions of his own accord. Probably he had become convinced that they were hunting stock and that every niche must be entered. (Range horses are quick to form opinions of that sort and to act upon them.) Johnny was dreaming along, and let Sandy go back toward the wall, but Sandy poking along with his head bobbing contentedly at the end of his long neck, swerved to the right, into a nature-built ell that had a fine-sifted sand floor, walls that converged toward the top, and an entrance which no one would suspect, surely, since Johnny himself had passed it by not half an hour before.

Johnny did not say a word. He sat there and gazed, a little awed by the discovery, thrilled with the feeling that this place had been planned especially for him; that Nature had built it and kept it until he needed it—in other words, that luck was with him, and that it would be madness to go against his luck.

He got down, went to the left wall and, taking long strides, stepped off the width of the place. Wide enough, plenty; he couldn't have ordered it any better himself. From the mouth he started to step the depth, but stopped when he had gone a third farther than the length of a military type fuselage. He turned and looked back toward the entrance, his hands on his hips, his eyes wide and glowing, his lips trembling and eager. He looked up at the top; with cottonwood poles and brush he could roof it against the sun and the winds. He looked at the fine, hard-packed sand floor that the winds never stirred. He looked at the walls.

But he would put his luck to another test. He would abide by it—so he told himself bravely. He felt in his pocket for a coin, pulled out a half-dollar, balanced it on his bent thumb and forefinger. He turned white around the mouth, as he always did when deep emotion gripped him. He hesitated. What if—? But if his luck was any good, it would hold. It had to hold!

"Heads, I go. Tails, I stay." He muttered the fateful six words and snapped his thumb up straight. The half-dollar went spinning, clinked against a high projection of rock, fell back to the sand floor.

Johnny stood where he was and stared at it. From where he was he could not see which side was uppermost, and he was afraid to go and look. But he had to look. He had to know, for he was still boy enough to feel solemnly bound by the toss. He walked slowly toward it, stared hard—and pounced like a kid after a hard-won marble.

"Heads, I go! That's the way I flipped 'er; it's a fair throw."

At the sound of his voice ringing in the confined space, Sandy lifted his head and looked at Johnny,

tolerantly. Johnny came toward him grinning, tossing the half-dollar and catching it, his steps springy. The last few yards he took in a run, and vaulted into the saddle without touching the stirrups at all. Even that did not seem to ease him quite. So he gave a whoop that echoed and re-echoed from the rock walls and made Sandy squat, lay back his ears, and shake his head violently.

At the mouth of the hidden nook Johnny turned to take a last, gloating survey of the place in the deepening dusk. "She sure will make one bird of a hangar!" he told Sandy glowingly. "Golly! oh, good *golly!*"

CHAPTER VII

FINDER, KEEPER

FROM the crest of a low, sandy ridge that had on it a giant cactus standing with four spiny knobbed fingers uplifted like a warning hand, Johnny surveyed with wide red-rimmed eyes the hidden basin that held his heart's desire. Tomaso's brother sat his sweaty horse beside Johnny and eyed both the gazer and the object of his gaze. A smile split whitely the swarthiness of Tomaso's brother's face.

"She's settin' there jus' like I told," he pointed out with a wilted kind of triumph, for the day was hot.

"Unh-hunh," Johnny conceded absent-mindedly. He was trying to make the thing look real to him after all the visions he had had of it.

He had had his spells of doubting the probity of Tomaso's brother; of secretly wondering whether the story of the plane might not be a ruse to lure him away from Sinkhole. But then, how would Tomaso or his brother know that Johnny would care anything about whether an aeroplane "sat" over in Mexico within riding distance of the Border? Johnny did not think of Tex as a possible factor in the proposition.

Well, there it was, anyway, not a quarter of a mile

away. Between him and the object of his quest the sand lay wrinkled in tiny drifts, with here and there a ragged grey bush leaning forlornly from the wind. One wing of the machine was tilted, as though it had careened a little in the winds, but from that distance Johnny could not tell what damage had been done. He kicked Sandy in the ribs and led the way down the hill. Tomaso's brother, still grinning, followed close behind.

" It's going to be some sweet job getting the thing home," Johnny growled, trying to disguise his excitement. " I expect I've had my trip for nothing. She don't look to be in very good condition."

The grin of Tomaso's brother changed its expression a bit, but he did not trouble to answer. Tomaso's brother knew far better than did Johnny all the rules of commerce. Johnny's clumsy attempt to depreciate what he wanted very much to buy merely convinced Tomaso's brother of the extreme youthfulness of Johnny.

" Well, I might as well give her the once-over, now I'm here," Johnny added with a fine air of indifference, and urged Sandy into a trot.

Now Sandy had discovered the secret hangar for Johnny without having the slightest imagining of the use which Johnny hoped to make of it. That he should ever have to face a thing like this was beyond his most fevered imagination. He had been a tired, sweaty, head-hanging horse when he started down the slope. He had trotted along with his half-closed eyes on the ground before him, picking the smoothest path for his desert-weary feet. He did not look up until Johnny pulled sharply on the reins and gave a startling whoop built around the word " Whoa."

Sandy's bulging eyes got a full-front, close-up view of the " thing what set." He saw a wicked nose

with a feeler about twice as high as he was. He saw great, terrible, outspread wings and a long slim body. It looked poised, ready to come at him and snatch him with one frightful swoop, as he had seen prairie hawks snatch little birds from the grass.

Sandy forgot that he was a tired, sweaty, head-hanging horse. He forgot everything except the four unbroken legs under him. He wheeled half away and went lunging up the far side of the little basin as if he felt the horrible creature close behind him.

Johnny's mind had been so absorbed by the aeroplane that it took him a few seconds to comprehend that Sandy was actually running away with him. It took him a few seconds longer to realize that Sandy's jaw was set like iron, with the bit gripped tight in his teeth. By the time he was thoroughly convinced that Sandy was going to be hard to stop, Sandy had topped the rise and was streaking it across an expanse of barrenness that rose gently in spite of the fact that it looked perfectly level. A sliding streak of grey dust rising into the heat waves marked his passing.

Nearly a mile he ran before the slight grade and a rocky strip slowed him down to a heavy gallop. Johnny had been in the mind to let the fool run himself down just for punishment, but the rocks and an eagerness to return to the stranded plane urged him to forego the discipline.

He stopped just where the scattered rocks ended abruptly in a wall that rimmed a sunken, green valley, narrowing near where Johnny stood looking down, but broadening farther along, and seeming to extend southward with many twistings and windings. Johnny viewed the place with a passing surprise, familiar though he was with the freakish topography of Arizona. It was the greenness, and the little wind-

ing creek, and the huddle of adobe buildings among the cottonwoods that struck him oddly. The creek might be a continuation of Sinkhole Creek, that disappeared into the sands away back there near his camp. There was nothing particularly strange about that, or the green growth that water made possible wherever the soil held latent fertility. It was the fact that those poor devils who lost the aeroplane—and themselves—should have wandered on and on, crazed with hunger and thirst, when food and water and perhaps a guide were to be found within a mile or so of where they landed.

It was a pity, thought Johnny. But, being very human, he also thought that if the airmen had found this place, that plane would not be sitting back there waiting his grave if inexpert inspection. So with his pity cooled a little with self-interest, Johnny turned the puffing Sandy upon the backward trail and followed his tracks across the apparently level stretch of barrenness to the basin where waited the plane and Tomaso's brother. Only for Sandy's tracks, Johnny knew he might have had a little trouble in finding the place again, the country looked so unbroken and monotonous.

However, he found it too soon for Sandy's comfort. There it sat—the giant bird that had seemed ready to swoop and rise. But now its back was turned toward him, and it did not look quite so fearsome. He circled and plunged awhile, and even made shift to pitch a little, tired as he was. But man's mastery prevailed, just as it had always done, and Sandy found himself edging closer and closer to the thing. The horse of Tomaso's brother, standing quiet in the very shade of a great wing, reassured him further, so that presently he stood subdued, but wall-eyed still, where Johnny could dismount and hand the reins to

the brother of Tomaso while he examined the prize.

His manner was impressive, and the brother of Tomaso stopped grinning to himself and began to look somewhat worried. He watched Johnny's face —and I assure you that Johnny's face would have been worth anyone's watching. A cigarette slanted from the corner of his boyish lips, and the eye on that side was squinted to keep out the smoke ; which was merely an impressive bit of by-play, because there was no smoke. The cigarette was not burning, though Johnny had made a hasty dab at it with a lighted match. The other eye was as coldly critical as was humanly possible when the whole heart of Johnny was swelling with ecstasy. His head was tilted a little, his hands were on his hips except when he used them to push and test and try some reachable part.

Johnny thrust out a foot and gently kicked the flattened tyre on one wheel. " Umh-humh," he muttered to himself. " Flat tyre." Never in his life had Johnny enjoyed the privilege of kicking a wheel on the landing gear of an aeroplane, but you would have thought that this was his business, and that it bored him intensely to do so. He took one hand off his hip long enough to lift the drooping wing that canted toward the south. " Mhm-hmh—busted skid," he observed, in a tone which, to the brother of Tomaso, shaved several dollars off the coveted fifty. Close behind Johnny he stayed, following him around the plane in a secret agony of apprehension.

Johnny, primed by the two rides he had taken—for a price—the fall before, stepped nimbly up and straddled into the pilot's seat. He found out, by actual experimentation, what wires tilted the ailerons, which ones operated the elevators. " Mhm-

hmh—dep control here," he commented; whereupon the brother of Tomaso squirmed, thinking Johnny had discovered a fatal flaw somewhere.

With one eye still squinted against cigarette smoke that did not rise, Johnny climbed out and walked back along the fuselage to the tail. "Mhm—hmh—I thought so!" he ejaculated, staring severely at the elevators. "This is bad—pret-ty darn bad! They musta done a tail-slide and pancaked. That's ba-ad." He removed the smokeless cigarette from his lips, looked at it, felt for a match, and shook his head slowly while he drew the match across a hot rock at his feet.

"Jus' broke little small," Tomaso's brother's voice came pleadingly from behind Johnny. "You can feex him easy. She's fine airship, you bet!"

Johnny turned and looked at him pityingly. "Say, where do you get that stuff?" he inquired. "A hell of a lot *you* know about airships—bringing me off down here to see *this!* Say! where's the fuselage at?" he abruptly demanded.

Tomaso's brother gazed at the machine with tragic eyes. "Me, I'm seem it here ontil this time I come," he declared virtuously. "I'm not touch notheeng. That fuz'lawge, she's right here las' time I'm here. I'm not touch notheeng but one little small hammer, one pliers. You find him up there, I bet." Tomaso's brother pointed to the pilot's seat.

"Hunh! a lot you know about it!" snorted Johnny, and turned and walked away to the other side of the machine where Tomaso's brother could not see him grin.

"No matter what kind of a cheese you are, you must know an aeroplane can't fly without a fuselage," he grumbled to the unhappy brother of Tomaso.

" Without that the plane's no good to me or anybody else. You better get busy and hunt it up."

Tomaso's brother tied the horses to the nearest bush and got busy, volubly protesting all the while that he had not touched a thing, and that if Tomaso really had carried off the fuz'lawge, he would presently make that young devil wish he had never been born.

" Maybe the aviators dropped it back there on the edge of the basin when they were coming down," Johnny suggested, and laid himself down in the shade of the plane to smoke and dream and gloat. He felt that he would burst into insane and costly whoops if he attempted another minute's repression. And he knew that Tomaso's brother would bleed him of his last dollar if he guessed one half of Johnny's exultation; wherefore the ruse to send Tomaso's brother off on a senseless quest.

" Oh, golly! Oh-h, good golly!" he murmured ecstatically, his eyes taking in the full sweep of the great wings. " It's too good to be true. No, it ain't; it's too good *not* to be true! You wait. I'll show the Rolling R bunch—you wait!"

He rolled to an elbow and looked back along the fuselage to the tail, his eyes dwelling fondly on the clean lines of her, the perfect symmetry, the glossy, unharmed covering. His glance went farther, to where the brother of Tomaso plodded toward the basin's rim, peering here and there, pausing to look under a bush, swerving to make sure the lost fuselage was not behind a rock.

Johnny's grin widened. Presently it exploded into a laugh, which he smothered with both hands clapped over his mouth. He writhed and kicked and rolled in the sand. His round blue eyes grew moist with the tears of a boy's exuberant mirth. From be-

hind his palms came muffled *who-who-who-oo-oos* of laughter.

He believed that he was laughing at the trick he had played on Tomaso's brother. He was doing more than that : he was making up for all the sober longing, for all the fears and the discouragements of his barren life. There had been so much hoping and sighing and futile wishing—it had been so long since Johnny Jewel had really laughed—and he was young, and youth is the time of care-free laughter. Now nature was striking a balance for him.

Tomaso's brother went up over the rim of the basin, disappeared, and then came plodding back through the heat. Johnny had laughed all that while ; laughed until his sides were sore ; until his eyes were red with the tears he had shed ; until he was so weak he staggered when he first crawled out from under the plane and stood up. But it did him good, for all that, to have laughed so hard and so long over an impish trick that came from the boy in him.

" Me, I don't find him that damn fuz'lawge," said the brother of Tomaso, wiping his swarthy countenance that was beaded with sweat. " That Tomaso, he has took, I bet. He brings it to you queeck when I'm through with him." He looked at Johnny expectantly. " I'm promise you it comes back all right if perhaps Tomaso has take. Perhaps now you pay twenty-fi' dollar ? "

" No, I don't ; I pay you ten dollars now." Johnny, remember, had a full two days' acquaintance with the brother of Tomaso. He was taking a certain precaution, rather than an unfair advantage. He honestly believed that the brother of Tomaso was best dealt with cautiously.

" When this aeroplane is safe at Sinkhole, and you've brought me every darned thing that's been

packed off, I'll pay you the rest of the fifty. There's more," he added meaningly, " that's missing. The fuselage ain't all."

The brother of Tomaso seemed unhappy. He took the ten dollars with a sigh, promised himself much unpleasantness for Tomaso, and wearily set about making camp, too dispirited to care that Johnny spent the time in fussing around the machine, making a thin pretence of looking it over for breakages and defects when all the while he was simply adoring it.

" At daybreak," Johnny announced with a new dignity in his voice—the dignity of one having valuable possessions and a potential power—" we'll start back. But I don't think much of your idea that we can drag this machine home with our saddle horses. We can't—not and have anything but a bundle of junk when we get there. There's a ranch over south here, a mile or so. Better see if you can't get a wagon and team. We'll have to haul it home somehow."

The brother of Tomaso started perceptibly. " A rancho ? But that is not possible, señor ! "

" Oh, ain't it ? I'll show yuh, then."

" Oh, no ! *No importa.* If it is a rancho in this countree, me, I'm find it without trobles for you."

Even Johnny's absorption in his treasure-trove could not altogether blind him to the fact that Tomaso's brother was perturbed. He wondered a little. But after all, there was only one thing now that really interested him, and he straightway returned to it, leaving the Mexican to find the ranch and hire a team. He was not afraid that the brother of Tomaso would fail him in that detail. Thirty American dollars look big to a Mexican.

He knew when Tomaso's brother mounted and rode away in the direction of the ranch, and he knew when he returned. But he failed to observe that the

brother of Tomaso was gone long enough to have crawled there and back on his hands and knees, and that he returned in a much better humour than when he had left.

" The wagon and mules, it will come at daytime," was his brief report. He crawled into his blankets and left Johnny perched up in the pilot's seat, planning and dreaming in the moonlight. The brother of Tomaso lifted his head once and looked at Johnny's head and shoulders, which was all of him that showed. Through half-closed lids he studied Johnny's profile and the look of exaltation in his wide-open eyes.

" Tex, he's one smart *hombre,*" Tomaso's brother paid tribute. " The plan it works aw-right, I bet."

CHAPTER VIII

OVER THE TELEPHONE

THAT night Johnny spread his blankets in a spot where he could lie and look at his aeroplane with the moon shining full upon it and throwing a shadow like a great, black bird with outstretched wings on the sand. He had to lie where he could look at it, else he could not have lain there at all. He was like a child that falls asleep with a new, long-coveted toy clasped tight in its two hands. He worried himself into a headache over the difficulties of transporting it unharmed over the miles of untracked desert country to Sinkhole. He was afraid the mules would run away with it, or upset it somehow. It looked so fragile, so easily broken. Already the tail was broken, where the flyers in landing had swerved against a rock. He pictured mishaps and disasters enough to fill a journey of five times that length over country twice as rough. He wished that he could fly it home. Picturing that, his lips softened into a smile, and the pucker eased out of his forehead.

But he couldn't fly it. He didn't know how, though I honestly believe he would have tried it anyway, had there been even a gallon of petrol in the tank. But the tank was bone dry, and the tail was knocked askew, so Johnny had to give up thinking about it.

When he slept, the aeroplane filled his dreams so that he talked in his sleep and wakened the brother of Tomaso, who sat up in his blankets to listen.

"That plan, she's work fine, I bet!" grinned the brother of Tomaso when Johnny had droned off into mumbling and then silence. "That Tex, she's smart *hombre*." He laid himself down to sleep again.

Speaking of Tex; that same night he lay awake for a long while, staring at the moon-lighted window and wishing that his eyesight could follow his thoughts and show him what he wanted to see. His thoughts took the trail to Sinkhole, dwelt there for a space in anxious speculation, drifted on to the Border and beyond and sought out Johnny Jewel, dwelling upon his quest with even more anxious speculation. Then, when sleep had dulled somewhat his reasoning faculties, Tex began to vision himself in Tucson—well, perhaps in Los Angeles, that Mecca of pleasure lovers—spending money freely, living for a little while the life of ease and idleness gemmed with the smiles of those beautiful women who hover gaily around the money pots in any country, in any clime.

For a hard-working cow-puncher with no visible assets save his riding gear and his skill with horses, the half-waking dreams of Tex were florid and as impossible, in the cold light of reason, as had been the dreams of Johnny Jewel in that bunk house.

That night others were awake in the moonlight. Down at Sinkhole camp five or six riders were driving a bunch of Rolling R horses into the corral where Johnny kept his riding horse overnight. They were not dreaming vaguely of the future, these riders. Instead they were very much awake to the present and the risks thereof. On the nearest ridge that gave an outlook to the north, a sentinel was stationed in the shade of a rocky out-cropping, ready to wheel

and gallop back with a warning if any rode that way.

When the horses were corralled and the gate closed, one man climbed upon the fence and gave orders. This horse was to be turned outside—and the gate-tender swung open the barrier to let it through. That horse could go, and that and that.

"A dozen or so is about as many as we better take," he said to one who worked near him. "No—turn that one back. I know—he's a good one, but his mane and tail, and them white stockings behind, they're too easy reco'nized. That long-legged bay, over there—he's got wind; look at the chest on 'im! Forequarters like a lion. Haze him out, boys." He turned himself on the fence and squinted over the bewildered little group of freed horses. He swung back and squinted over the bunch in the corral, weighing a delicate problem in his mind, to judge by the look of him.

"All right, boys. We kain't afford to be hawgs, this trip. Straddle your hosses and take 'em over to that far corner where we laid the fence down. Remember what I said about keepin' to the rocky draws. I'll wait here and turn these loose, and foller along and set up the fence after yuh. And keep agoin'—only don't swing over toward Baptista's place, mind. Keep to the left all you can. And keep a look out ahead. Yuh don't want that kid to get a squint at yuh."

One answered him in Mexican while they slipped out and mounted. They rode away, driving the horses they had chosen. Unobtrusive horses as to colour; bays and browns, mostly, of the commonplace type that would not easily be missed from the herd. The man on the fence smoked a cigarette and studied the horses milling restlessly below him in the corral.

From the adobe cabin squatting in the moonlight

came the shrill, insistent jingling of a bell. The man looked that way thoughtfully, climbed down and went to the cabin, keeping carefully in the beaten trail.

The door was not locked. A rawhide thong tied it fast to a staple in the door jamb. With the bell shrilling its summons inside, the man paused long enough to study the knotting of the thong before he untied it and stepped inside. He went to the telephone slowly, thoughtfully, his cigarette held between two fingers, his forehead drawn down so that his eyebrows were pinched together. He hesitated perceptibly before he took down the receiver. Then he grinned.

"Hello!" His voice was hoarse, slightly muffled. He grinned again when he caught the mildly querulous tones of Sudden Selmer, sharpened a little by the transmitter.

"Where the dickens have you been? I've been trying all evening to get you," Sudden complained.

"Huh? Oh, I just got in. I been fixing fence over west of here. Took me till dark—— No, the stock's all in—wind had blowed down a couple of them rotten posts—well, they was rotten enough to sag over, so I had to reset them—— Had to reset them, I said! Dig new holes!" He turned his face a little away from the transmitter and coughed, then grinned while he listened.

"Oh, nothing—just a cold I caught—— Don't amount to anything. I'm doctoring it. I always get hoarse when I catch a little cold—— Sure, everything's all right. I'm going to ride fence to-morrow —That so? It blowed to beat the cars, down here all night—— Why, they're lookin' fine—— No, ain't saw a soul. I guess they know better than to bother our stock—— All right, Mr. Selmer, I will

—and say! I might be late in getting in to-morrow, but everything's fine as silk—— All right. G'bye!"

He hung up the receiver before he started to laugh, but once he did start, he laughed all the time he was re-tying the door in the same kind of knot Johnny had used, and all the while he was returning to the corral.

"Fell for it, all right. Nothing can beat having a cold right handy," he chuckled when he had turned out the stock, whistled for the sentinel, and mounted his horse. "Guess I better happen around to-morrow evening. They won't be back—not if they bring it with 'em."

While he waited for the guard to come in, he eyed the corral and its immediate neighbourhood, and afterwards inspected the cloud-flecked sky. "Corral shows a bunch of stock has been penned here," he muttered. "But the wind'll raise before sun-up. I guess it'll be all right."

The sentinel came trotting around the corner. "How many?" he asked, riding alongside the other.

"Fifteen, all told. To-morrow night we'll cull that bunch that ranges west of here. Won't do to trim out too many at a time, and they may be back here to-morrow night. They will if they can't get it over. I don't much expect they will, at that—unless they bring it in pieces. Still, yuh can't tell what a crazy kid'll take a notion to do; not when he's got a bug like Tex says this one has got."

"Tex is pretty cute, aw-right. Me, I'd never a-thought of that."

The boss grunted. "Tex is paid for being cute. He's on the inside, where he's got a chance to know these things. He wouldn't be worth a nickel to us if he wasn't cute."

"And it's us that takes the chances," readily agreed the guard.

"Yeah—look at the chance I took jus' now! Talked to old Sudden over the 'phone, stalling along like I was the kid. Got away with it, at that. I'd like to see Tex——"

"Aw, Tex ain't in it with *you*. When it comes right down to fine work——" So, feeding the vanity of the boss with titbits of crude flattery, which the boss swallowed greedily as nine-tenths of us would do, they jogged along down the pebbly bottom of Sinkhole Creek where it had gone dry, turned into the first rocky draw that pointed south-eastward, and so passed on and away from the camp where Tex's thoughts were clinging anxiously.

When they had carefully mended the fence that had been opened, and had obliterated all traces of horses passing through, they rode home to their beds perfectly satisfied with the night's work, and looking forward to the next night.

A hot, windy day went over the arid range; a day filled with contented labour for some, strenuous activity for some others—Johnny Jewel among these—and more or less anxious waiting for a very few.

That day the fifteen stolen horses, urged forward by grimy, swearing Mexicans and a white man or two, trotted heavily southward, keeping always to the sheltered draws and never showing upon a ridge until after a look-out had waved that all was well.

That day Mary V rode aimlessly to the western hills, because she saw three of the boys hiking off toward the south and she did not know where they were going.

That day Johnny Jewel suffered chronic heart jumpings, lest the four wide-blinkered mules look round again and, seeing themselves still pursued by the great, ungainly contraption on the lengthened wagon they drew, run away and upset their precariously balanced load.

That day the man who had so obligingly answered the telephone for Johnny busied himself with various plans and preparations for the night, and retraced the trail down the rocky draws to the fence where horses and riders had crossed, to make sure, by daylight, that no trace had been left of their passing, and met Tex over by Snake Ridge for a brief and very satisfactory conference.

So the day blew itself red in the face, and then purple, with a tender, rose-violet haze under its one crimson, lazily drooping eye. And at last it wrapped itself in its royal gemmed robe, and settled quietly down to sleep. Night came stepping softly across the hills and the sandy plains, carrying her full-lighted lantern that painted black shadows beside every rock and bush and cut-bank.

With the deepening of the shadows and the rising drone of night sounds and the whispering of the breeze which was all that was left of the wind, the man came riding cautiously up through a draw to the willow growth just below Sinkhole watering place. He tied his horse there and went on afoot, stepping on rocks and grass tufts and gravelly spots as easily as though he had practised that mode of travel.

Sinkhole cabin was dark and quiet and lonesome, but still he waited for awhile in the shadow and watched the place before he ventured forth. He did not go at once to the cabin, but always treading carefully where imprints would be lightest, he made a further inspection of the corral. The wind had done its work there, and hoof-prints were practically obliterated. Satisfied, he returned to the cabin and sat down on the bench beside the door, where he could watch the trail while he waited.

The telephone rang. The man untied the door, went in, and answered it hoarsely. Everything was

all right, he reported. He had ridden the fence and tightened one or two loose wires. Yes, the water was holding out all right, and the horses came to water every night about sundown, or else early in the morning before the flies got too bad. His cold was better, and he didn't need a thing that he knew of. And good-bye, Mr. Selmer.

He went out, very well satisfied with himself; re-tied the door carefully with Johnny's own peculiar kind of hitch, stooped and felt the hard-packed earth to make sure he had not inadvertently dropped a cigarette butt that might possibly betray him, and rolled a fresh smoke before leaving for home. He had just lighted it and was moving away toward the creek when the telephone jingled a second summons. He would have to answer it, of course. Old Sudden knew he couldn't be far away, and would ring until he did answer. He unfastened the door again, cursing to himself and wondering if the Rolling R people were in the habit of calling Johnny Jewel every ten minutes or so. He stumbled over a box that he had missed before, swore, and called a gruff hello.

"Oh, hello, cowboy!" Unmistakably feminine, that voice; unmistakably provocative, too—subdued, demure, on guard, as though it were ready to adopt any one of several tones when it spoke again.

"Oh—er—hello! That you, Mr. Selmer?" The man did not forget his hoarseness. He even coughed discreetly.

"Why, *no!* This is Venus speaking. May I ask if you expected Miss Selmer to call you up?" Raised eyebrows would harmonize perfectly with that tone, which was sugary, icily gracious.

"Oh—er—hello! That you, Miss Selmer? Beg your pardon—my mistake. Er—ah—how are yuh this evenin'?"

"Oh—lonesome." A sigh seemed to waft over the wire. "You see, I have quarrelled with Mars again. He *would* drink out of your big dipper in spite of me! I knew you wouldn't like that—"

"Oh—why no, of course not!" The hoarseness broke slightly, here and there. A worried tone was faintly manifesting itself.

"And I was wondering when you are coming to take me for another ride!"

"Why—ah—just as soon as I can, Miss Venus. You know my time ain't my own—but maybe Sunday I could git off."

"How nice! What a bad cold you have! How did you catch it?" Sweetly solicitous now, that voice.

"Why, I dunno——"

"Was it from going without your coat when we were riding last time?"

"I—yes, I guess it was; but that don't matter. I'd be willing to ketch a dozen colds riding with you. It don't matter at all."

"Oh, but it does! It matters a great deal—Dearie! Did you really think I was that nasty Mary V Selmer calling you up?"

"Why, no, I—I was just talking to her father—but as soon as I—I was thinking maybe the old man had forgot something, and had her—uh course I knowed your voice right away—sweetheart." That was very daring. The man's forehead was all beaded with perspiration by this time, and it was not the heat that caused it. "You know I wouldn't talk to her if I didn't have to." It is very difficult to speak in honeyed accents that would still carry a bullfrog hoarseness, but the man tried it, nevertheless.

"Dearie! Honest?"

"You know it!" He was bolder now that he

knew endearing terms were accepted as a matter of course.

"OO—oo! I believe you're fibbin. You kept calling me *Miss* Venus just as if—you—liked somebody else better. Just for that, I'm not going to talk another minute. And you needn't call up, either—for I shall not answer!"

She hung up the receiver, and the man, once he was sure of it, did likewise. He wiped his forehead, damned all women impartially as a thus-and-so nuisance that would queer a man's game every time if he wasn't sharp enough to meet their plays, and went outside. He still felt very well satisfied with himself, but his satisfaction was tempered with thankfulness that he was clever enough to fool that confounded girl. All the way back to his horse he was trying to "place" the voice and the name.

Some one within riding distance, it must be—some one visiting in the country. He sure didn't know of any ranch girl named Venus. After awhile he felt he could afford to grin over the incident. "Never knowed the difference," he boasted as he rode away. "Nine men outa ten woulda overplayed their hand, right there."

Just how far he had overplayed his hand, that man never knew. Far enough to send Mary V to her room rather white and scared; shaking, too, with excitement. She stood by the window, looking out at the moon-lighted yard with its wind-beaten flowers. To save her life she could not help recalling the story of Little Red Riding Hood, nor could she rid herself of the odd sensation of having talked with the Wolf. Though she did not, of course, carry the simile so far as to liken Johnny Jewel to the Grandmother.

She did not know what to do—a strange sensation for Mary V, I assure you. Once she got as far

as the door, meaning to go out on the porch and tell her dad that somebody was down at Sinkhole Camp pretending that he was Johnny Jewel when he was nothing of the sort, and that the boys had better go right straight down there and see what was the matter.

She did not get farther than the door, however, and for what would seem a very trifling reason ; she did not want her dad to know that she had been trying to talk to Johnny over the 'phone.

She went back to the window. *Who* was down there pretending to be Johnny Jewel ? And what, in heaven's name, was he doing it for ? She remembered the Mexican who had ridden up that day and pretended that he wanted matches, and how he had returned to the camp almost as soon as she had left. But the man who had talked with her was not a Mexican. No one but a white man—and a range man, she added to herself—would say, " Uh course I knowed yore voice." And he had not really had a cold. Mary V's ears were sharper than her dad's, for she had caught the make-believe in the hoarseness. She knew perfectly well that Johnny Jewel might be hoarse as a crow and never talk that way. Johnny never said " Uh course I knowed," and Johnny would choke before he'd ever call her sweetheart. He wouldn't have let that man do it, either, had Johnny been present in the cabin, she suspected shrewdly.

Being an impulsive young person who acted first and did her thinking afterwards, Mary V did exactly what she should not have done. She decided forthwith that she would take a long moonlight ride.

CHAPTER IX

A MIDNIGHT RIDE

"MARY V, what are you doing in the kitchen? Remember, I told you you shouldn't make any more fudge for a week. I don't want any more sessions with Bedelia like I had last time you left the kitchen all messed up with your candy. What are you *doing*?"

Mary V licked a dab of loganberry jelly from her left thumb and answered with her face turned toward the open window nearest the porch where her mother sat rocking peacefully.

"Oh, for gracious *sake*, mom! I'm only putting up a little lunch before I go to bed. I'm going to take my rides earlier, after this, and it wouldn't be kind for me to wake the whole house up at daybreak, getting my lunch ready——"

"If you're going at daybreak, why do you need a lunch? If you think I'll permit you to stay out in the heat all day without any breakfast——"

"Well, mom! I can't take pictures at daybreak, can I? I've *got* to stay out till the light is strong enough. And there's a special place I want, and if I go early, I can get back early; before lunch, at the very latest. Do you *want* me to go without anything to eat?"

"Seems to me you're running them 'Desert

Glimpses ' into the ground," her mother grumbled comfortably. " You've got a stack higher than your head, now. And some of these days you'll get bit with a snake or a centipede or——"

" Centipedes don't bite. They grab with their toes. My goodness, mom ! A person's got to do *something !* I don't see what harm there is in my riding horseback in the early morning. It's a healthful form of exercise——"

" It's a darn fad, and you'll go back to school looking like a squaw—and serve you right. It's getting along towards the time when snakes go blind. You want to be careful, Mary V——"

" Oh, piffle ! I've lived here all my life, just about, and I never *saw* a person bitten with a snake. And neither did you, mom, and you know it. But, of course, if you insist on making me sit in the house day in and day out——" Mary V cut two more slices of bread and began spreading them liberally with butter. She looked very grieved, and very determined.

" Oh, nobody ever made you sit in the house yet. They'd have to tie you hand and foot to do it," came the placid retort. " Don't you go helping yourself to that new jelly, Mary V. The old has got to be used up first. And you wipe off the sink when you're through messing round. Bedelia's hinting that she's going to quit when her month is up. It don't help me a mite to keep her calmed down when you leave a mess for her every time you go near the kitchen. She says she's sick and tired of cleaning up after you. You know what'll happen if she does quit, Mary V. You'll be getting your ' Desert Glimpses ' out the kitchen window for a month or so, washing dishes while we scurrup around after another cook. Bedelia——"

"Oh, plague *take* Bedelia!" snapped Mary V. But she nevertheless spent precious minutes wiping the knife on Bedelia's clean dish towel, and putting away the butter and the bread, and mopping up the splatters of loganberry jam. Getting her "Desert Glimpses" through the kitchen window formed no part of Mary V's plans or desires.

They seemed to Mary V to be precious minutes, although they would otherwise have been spent in the wearisome task of waiting until the ranch was asleep. She took her jam sandwiches and pickles and cake to her room, chirping a blithe good-night to her unsuspecting parents. Then, instead of going to bed as she very plainly indicated to those guileless parents that she meant to do, she clothed herself in her riding breeches, shirt, and coat, and was getting her riding shoes and puttees out of the closet when she heard her mother coming.

A girl can do a good deal in a minute, if she really bestirs herself. Her mother found Mary V sitting before her dressing table with her hair hanging down her back. She was enfolded in a very pretty pink silk kimono, and she was leisurely dabbing cold cream on her chin and cheeks with her finger tips.

"Be sure you take your goggles with you, Mary V. I notice your eyelids are all red and inflamed lately when you come in from your rides. And do put them on and wear them if the wind comes up. It's easier to take a little trouble preventing sore eyes and sunburn than it is to cure them. And don't stay out late in the heat."

"All right, mommie." Drawing her kimono closer about her, Mary V put her face up to be kissed. Her mother hesitated, looking dubiously at the cream dabs, compromised with a peck on Mary V's forehead, and went away. Mary V braided her

hair, put on a pair of beaded moccasins, buckled on her six-shooter and gathered together her other paraphernalia. She waited an hour by her wrist watch, but even that sixty minutes of inaction did not bring her better judgment to the rescue.

Sober judgment had no place in her thoughts. Instead, she spent the time in wondering if Tango would let her catch him in the corral; in fretting because she must wait at all, when there was no telling what might have happened at Sinkhole; and in giving audience to a temptation that came with the lagging minutes and began persuading her that Tango was too slow for the trip she had before her; and in climbing into bed, turning over three times and climbing out again, leaving the light covering in its usual heap in the middle.

It was half-past nine when she climbed out of her window with her riding shoes and puttees, her lunch and her camera and her field glasses in a bundle under one arm. She went in her moccasins until she had passed the bunk house and reached the shed where she kept her saddle.

A dozen horses were dozing over by the feed rack in the corral, and Mary V's eyes strayed often that way while she was clothing her feet for the ride. Tango was a good little horse, but he was not the horse for a heroine to ride when she went out across the desert at midnight to rescue—er—a good-for-nothing, conceited, quarrelsome, altogether unbearable young man whom she thoroughly hated, but who was, after all, a human being and therefore to be rescued when necessary.

Would she dare——? Mary V hurried the last puttee buckle, picked up her bridle and a battered feed pan, and went quietly across the corral. Wondering if she would dare made her daring.

Most of the horses sidled off from her approach and began to circle slowly to the far side of the corral. Tango lifted his head and looked at her reproachfully, moved his feet as though tempted to retreat, and thought better of it. What was the use? Mary V always did what she wanted to do; if not in one way, then in another. Knowing her so well, Tango stood still.

Mary V smiled. Just beyond him another horse also stood still. A tall, big-chested, brilliant-eyed brown, with a crinkly mane, forelock, and tail, and with a reputation that made his name familiar to men in other counties. His official name was Messenger, but the boys called him Jake for short. They also asserted pridefully that he had "good blood in him." He belonged to Bill Hayden, really, but the whole Rolling R outfit felt a proprietary interest in him because he had "cleaned up" every horse in southern Arizona outside the professional class.

Ordinarily Mary V would never have thought of such a thing as riding Jake. She would have considered it as much as her life was worth to put her saddle on him without first asking Bill. Once she had asked Bill, and Bill had looked as if she had asked for his toothbrush; shocked, incredulous, as though he could not believe his ears. "Well, I should sa-ay not!" Bill had replied when she had made it plain that she expected an answer.

Ordinarily that would be accepted as final, even by Mary V. But ordinarily Mary V did not climb out of her bedroom window to ride all night, even though there was a perfectly intoxicating moon. Certainly not to a far line-camp where a young man lived alone, just to ask him why some one else answered his telephone for him.

To-night was her night for extraordinary behaviour,

evidently. She certainly showed that she had designs on Jake. She held out the feed pan, and gritted her teeth when Tango gratefully ducked his nose into it. She let him have one quivery-lipped nibble, and pushed the pan ingratiatingly toward the black muzzle beyond.

Jake was not a bronk. Having " good blood " he was tame to a degree. He knew Mary V very well by sight, and, if horses can talk, he had no doubt learned a good deal about her from his friend Tango, who usually came home with a grievance. Jake accepted the feed pan graciously, and he did not shy off when Mary V pushed Tango out of her way and began to smooth Jake's crinkly mane and coax him with endearing words. After a little he permitted her to slip the bridle reins over his head, and to press the bit gently into his mouth. She set the pan on the ground and so managed to tuck his stiff, brown ears under the headstall, and to pull out his forelock comfortably while he nosed the pan. The bridge was too small for Jake, but Mary V thought it would do, since she was in a great hurry and the buckles would be stiff and hard to open. The throat latch would not fasten where Tango always wore it, but went down three holes farther. Jake was bigger than she had thought.

But she led him over to the shed door and adjusted the saddle blanket and, standing on her tiptoes, managed to heave her saddle into place. The cinch had to be let out too. Mary V was trembling with impatience to be gone, now that she had two heinous sins loaded upon her conscience instead of one, but she knew better than to start off before her saddle was right. And, impressed now with the size of Jake, she stood on a box and let out the headstall two holes.

Jake did not seem to approve of her camera and canteen and field glasses and rifle, and stepped restlessly away from her when she went to tie them on. So she compromised on the canteen and field glasses, and hid camera and rifle under some sacks in the shed. It seemed to her that she would never get started; as though daylight—and Bill Hayden—would come and find her still in a nightmare struggle with the details of departure. Back of all that the thought of that strange, disguised voice talking for Johnny Jewel nagged at her nerves as something sinister and mysterious.

She led Jake by a somewhat roundabout way to the gate, opened it and closed it behind them before she attempted to mount. Jake was very tall—much taller than he had ever before seemed to be. She had to hunt a high spot and coax him to stand on the lower ground beside it before she could feel confidence enough to lift her toe to the stirrup. Bill Hayden always danced around a good deal on one foot, she remembered, before he essayed to swing up. Standing on an ant hill did not permit much of the preliminary dancing around to which Jake was accustomed, so Mary V caught reins and saddle horn and made a desperate, flying leap.

She landed in the saddle, found the stirrups and cried, "You, Jake!" in a not altogether convincing tone. Jake was walking on his hind feet by way of intimating that he objected to so tight a rein. After that he danced sidewise, fought for his head, munched the strange bit angrily, snorted and made what the boys called Jake's chain-lightnin' getaway.

Mary V knew that Jake was running away with her, but since he was running along the trail to Sinkhole Camp she did not mind so much as you might think. At the worst he would fall down and she

would get a " spill." She knew the sensation, having been spilled several times. So she gripped him tightly with her strong young knees and let him run. And after the first shock of dismay, she thrilled to the swift flight, with a guilty exultation in what she had done.

Jake ran a couple of miles before he showed any symptom of slowing. After that he straightened out in a long, easy lope that was a sheer delight to Mary V, though she knew it must not be permitted for very long, because Jake had a good many miles to cover before daylight. She brought him down gradually to a swinging, " running walk " that would have kept any ordinary saddle horse trotting to match for speed, and although he still mouthed the strange bit pettishly, he carried Mary V over the trail with a kingly graciousness that instilled a deep respect into that arrogant young lady.

Tango, I think, would have been amazed to see how Mary V refrained from bullying her mount that night. There was no mane-pulling, no little, nipping pinches of the neck to imitate the bite of a fly, no scolding—nothing that Tango had come to take for granted when Mary V bestrode him.

It was only a little after one o'clock when Mary V, holding Jake down to a walk, nervously passed the empty corral at Sinkhole Camp. She paused awhile in the shadows, wondering what she had better do next. After all, it would be awkward to investigate the interior of the little cabin that squatted there so silently under the moon. She hesitated to dismount. Frankly, Mary V felt much safer with a fleet horse under her, and she was afraid that she might not be so lucky next time in mounting. So she began to reconnoitre warily on horseback.

She rode up to the window of the little shed, and saw that it was empty. She rode inside the corral

and made a complete circuit of the fence, and saw nothing whatever of Johnny's saddle and bridle. They would be somewhere around, surely, if he were here. She avoided the cabin, but rode down to the pasture in the creek bottom where Johnny's extra horse would be feeding. The horse was there, and came trotting lonesomely up to the fence when he saw Jake. But there was only the one horse, which seemed to prove that the other horse was with the saddle and bridle—wherever they were.

Mary V returned to the corral, still keeping far enough away from the cabin to hide the sound of Jake's hoof-beats from anyone within. She tied the horse to a corral post and went on foot to the cabin. She carried her six-shooter in her hand, and she carried in her throat a nervous fluttering.

First she sidled up to a window and listened, then peered in. She could see nothing, for the moon had slid over toward the west, and the room was a blur of shade. But it was also silent, depressingly silent. She crept around to the door, and found that it was fastened on the outside.

That heartened her a little. She undid the rawhide string and pushed the door open a little way. Nothing happened. She pushed it a little farther, listened, grew bolder—yet frightened with a new fear—and stepped inside.

It was very quiet. It was so quiet that Mary V held her breath and was tempted to turn and run away. She waited for a minute, her nostrils widened to the pent odour of stale cigarette smoke that clings to a bachelor's cabin in warm weather. She tiptoed across the room to where Johnny's cot stood and timidly passed her hands above the covers. Emboldened by its flat emptiness, Mary V turned and felt along the window ledge where she had seen that

Johnny kept his matches, found the box, and lighted a match.

The flare showed her the empty room. Oddly she stared at the telephone as though she expected it to reveal something. Some one had stood there and had talked with her. And Johnny was not at camp at all; had not been, since——

With a truly feminine instinct she turned to the crude cupboard and looked in. She inspected a dish of brown beans, sniffed and wrinkled her nose. They were sour, and the ones on top were dried with long standing. Johnny's biscuits, on a tin plate, were hard and dry. Not a thing in that cupboard looked as though it had been cooked later than two or three days before.

A reaction of rage seized Mary V. She went out, tied the door shut with two spitefully hard-drawn knots, mounted Jake without a thought of his height or his dancing accomplishments, and headed for home at a gallop.

She hated Johnny Jewel every step of the way. I suppose it is exasperating to ride a forbidden, treasured horse on a forbidden, possibly dangerous night journey to rescue a man from some unknown peril, and discover that the young man is not at hand to be rescued. Mary V seemed to find it so. She decided that Johnny Jewel was up to some devilment, and had probably hired that man to answer the phone for him so her dad would not know he was gone. He thought he was very clever, of course—putting the man up to pretending he had a cold, just to fool her dad. Well, he had fooled her dad, all right, but there happened to be a person on the ranch he could not fool. That person *hoped* she was smarter than Johnny Jewel, and to prove it she would find out what it was he was trying to be so secret

about. And then she would confront him with the proof, and then where would he be?

She certainly owed it to the outfit—to her dad—to find out what was going on. There was no use, she told herself virtuously, in worrying her dad about it until she knew just exactly what that miserable Johnny Jewel was up to. Poor dad had enough to worry about without filling his mind with suspicious and mysterious men with fake colds, and things like that.

Mary V unsaddled a very sweaty Jake before the sky was reddening with the dawn; before even the earliest of little brown birds were a-chirp or a rooster had lifted his head to crow.

She wakened Tango with the bridle, slapped her saddle on him and tightened it with petulant jerks, got her rifle and her camera out from under the sacks, mounted and rode away again before even the cook had crawled out of his blankets.

CHAPTER X

SIGNS, AND NO ONE TO READ THEM

BILL HAYDEN'S mouth was pinched into a straight line across his desert-scarred face. He shortened his hold on the rope that held Jake and passed the flat of his hand down Jake's neck under the heavy mane. He held up a moistened palm and looked at it needlessly. He stepped back and surveyed the drawn-in flanks, and with his eye he measured the length and depth of the saddle marks, as though he half hoped thereby to identify the saddle that had made them. His eyes were hard with the cold fury that lumped the muscles on his jaw.

He turned his head and surveyed the scattered group of boys busy with ropes, bridles and saddles—making ready for the day's work, which happened to be the gathering of more horses to break, for the war across the water used up horses at an amazing rate, and Sudden was not the man to let good prices go to waste. The horse herd would be culled of its likeliest saddle horses while the market was best.

To-day, and for several days, the boys would ride north and west, combing the rough country that held two broad-bottomed streams and therefore fair grazing for horses. Bill had meant to ride Jake, but he was changing his mind. Jake, from the look of him, had lately received exercise enough to last him for

one day, at least. Suspicion dwelt in Bill's eyes as they rested on each man in turn. They halted at Tex, who was standing with his head up, staring at Jake with more interest than Bill believed an innocent man had any right to feel. Tex caught his glance and came over, trailing his loop behind him.

"What yo'-all been doing to Jake, gantin' him up like that, Bill?" Tex inquired, his black eyes taking in the various marks of hard riding that had infuriated Bill.

Bill hesitated, spat into the dust, and turned half away, stroking Jake's roughened shoulder.

"Me, I been workin' him out, mebby. What's it *to* yuh?"

"Me? It ain't nothin' a-tall to me, Bill. Only —yo' all shore done it thorough," grinned Tex, and passed on to where a horse he wanted was standing with his head against the fence, hoping to dodge the loop he felt sure would presently come hissing his way.

Bill watched him from under his eyebrows, and he observed that Tex sent more than one glance toward Jake. Bill interpreted those glances to suit himself, and while he unobtrusively led Jake into a shed to give him a hurried grooming before saddling another horse, Bill did some hard thinking.

"Shore is a night-rider in this outfit," he summed up. "He shore did pick himself a top hoss, and he shore rode the tail off'n 'im just about. Me, I'm crazy to know who done it."

Bill had to hurry, so he left the matter to simmer for the present. But that did not mean that Bill would wear "blinders," or that he would sleep with his head under his tarp for fear of finding out what black-hearted renegade had sacrilegiously borrowed Jake. Black-hearted renegade, by the way, was but

the dwindling to mild epithets after Bill's more colourful vocabulary had been worn to rags by repetition.

All unconsciously Mary V had set another man in the outfit to sweating his brain and swearing to himself. Tex would not sleep sound again until he knew who had taken to night-riding—on a horse of Jake's quality. Tex would have believed that Bill himself was the man, had he not read the look on Bill's face while he studied the marks of hard riding. Tex was no fool, else his income would have been restricted to what he could earn by the sweat of his skin. Bill had been unconscious of scrutiny when Tex had caught that look, and Bill had furthermore betrayed suspicion when Tex spoke to him about the horse. Bill was mad, which Tex took as proof that Bill had lain in his bed all night. Besides, Bill would hardly have left Jake in the corral where he could have free access to the water trough after such a ride as that must have been. Someone had brought Jake home in such a hurry that he had merely pulled his saddle and bridle off and—hustled back to bed, perhaps.

Tex was worried, and for a very good reason. He had been abroad the night before, dodging off down the draw to the west until he could circle the ridge and ride south. He had been too shrewd to ride a fagged horse home and leave him in the corral to tell the tale of night prowling, however. He had taken the time to catch a fresh horse from the pasture, tie his own horse in a secluded place until his return, and re-saddle it to ride back to the ranch, careful not to moisten a hair. He felt a certain contempt for the stupidity that would leave such evidence as Jake, but for all that he was worried. Being the scoundrel he was, he jumped to the conclusion that some one had been spying on him. It was a mystery that bred watchfulness and much cogitation.

"What's that about some geeser riding Jake las' night?" Bud, riding slowly until Bill overtook him, asked curiously, with the freedom of close friendship. "Tex was saying something about it to Curley when they rode past me, but I didn't ketch it all. Anything in it?"

Bill cleared his mind again with blistering epithets before he answered Bud directly. "Jake was rode, and he was rode hard. It was a cool night—and I know what it takes to put that hawse in a lather. I wisht I'd a-got to feel a few saddle blankets this morning! The——" Bill cussed himself out of breath.

When he stopped, Bud took up the refrain. It was not his horse, of course, but an unwritten law of the range had been broken, and that was any honest rider's affair. Besides, Bill was a pal of Bud's. "Hangin's too good for 'im, whoever done it," he finished vindictively. "I'd lay low, if I was you, Bill. Mebby he'll git into the habit, and you kin ketch 'im at it."

"I aim to lay low, all right. And I aim to come up a-shootin' if the ——"

"Yore dead right, Bill. Night-ridin's bad enough when a feller rides his own hawse. It'd need some darn smooth explainin' then. But when a man takes an' saddles up another feller's hawse——"

"I kin see his objeck in that," Bill said. "He had a long trail to foller, an' he tuk the hawse that'd git 'im there and back the quickest. Now what I'd admire to know is, who was the rider, an' where was he goin' to? D'you happen to miss anybody las' night, Bud?"

"Me? Thunder! Bill, you know damn well I wouldn't miss my own beddin' roll if it was drug out from under me!"

"Same here," mourned Bill. "Ridin' bronks shore does make a feller ready for the hay. Me, I died soon as my head hit my piller."

"Mary V, she musta hit out plumb early this morning," Bud observed gropingly. "She was saddled and gone when I come to the c'rel at sun-up. Yuh might ast her if she seen anybody, Bill. Chances is she wouldn't, but they's no harm askin'."

"I will," Bill said sourly. "Any devilment that's goin' on around this outfit, Mary V's either doin' it er gettin' next to it so's she kin hold a club over whoever done it. She mebby mighta saw him—if she was a mind to tell."

"Yeah—that shore is Mary V," Bud agreed heartily. "Bawl yuh out quick enough if they's anything yuh want kep' under cover, and then turnin' right around and makin' a clam ashamed of itself for a mouthy cuss if yuh want to know anything right bad. Bound she'd go with us getherin' hosses when she wasn't needed nor wanted, and now when we're short-handed, she ain't able to see us no more a-tall when we start off. You'll have to git upon 'er blind side some way, Bill, er she won't tell, if she does know who rode Jake."

"Blind side?" Bill snorted. "Mary V ain't got no blind side 't I ever seen."

"And that's right too. Ain't it the truth! I don't guess, Bill, yuh better let on to Mary V nothin' about it. Then they's a chance she may tell yuh jest to spite the other feller, if she does happen to know. A slim chance—but still she might."

"Slim chance is right!" Bill stated with feeling.

During this colloquy Mary V's ears might have burned, had Mary V not been too thoroughly engrossed with her own emotions to be sensitive to the emotions of others.

Mary V was pounding along toward Black Ridge —or Snake Ridge, as some preferred to call it. She was tired, of course. Her head ached; and more than once she slowed Tango to a walk while she debated with herself whether it was really worth while to wear herself completely out in the cause of righteousness.

Mary V did not in the least suspect just how righteous was the cause. How could she know, for instance, that Rolling R horses were being selected just as carefully on the southern range as they were to the north, since even that shrewd range man, her father, certainly had no suspicion that the revolutionists farther to the east in Mexico would presently begin to ride fresh mounts with freshly blotched brands? He had vaguely feared a raid, perhaps, but even that fear was not strong enough to impel him to keep more than one man at Sinkhole.

Sudden was not the man to overlook a sure profit while he guarded against a possible danger. He needed all the riders he had, or could get, to break horses for the buyers that were beginning to make regular trips through the country. He knew, too, that it would take more than two or three men at Sinkhole to stand off a raid, and that one man with a telephone and a rifle and six-shooter could do as much to protect his herds as three or four men, and with less personal risk. Sudden banked rather heavily on that telephone. He was prepared, at any alarming silence, to send the boys down there post-haste to investigate. But so long as Johnny reported every evening that all was well, the horse-breaking would go on.

It is a pity that he had not impressed these facts more deeply upon Johnny. A pity, too, that he had not confided in Mary V. Because Mary V might have had a little information for her dad, if she

had understood the situation more thoroughly. As thoroughly as Tex understood it, for instance.

Tex knew that any suspicion on the part of the line rider at Sinkhole, or any failure on his part to report every evening, would be the signal for Sudden to sweep the Sinkhole range clean of Rolling R horses. He had worried a good deal because he had forgotten to tell his confederates that they must remember to take care of the telephone somehow, in case Johnny was lured away after the aeroplane. It had been that worry which had sent him out in the night to find them and tell them—and to learn just what was taking place, and how many horses they had got. When a man is supposed to receive a commission on each horse that is stolen successfully, he may be expected to exhibit some anxiety over the truth of the tally. You will see why it was necessary to the peace and prosperity of Tex that the surface should be kept very smooth and unruffled.

Tex, of course, overlooked one detail. He should have worried over Mary V and her industrious gathering of " Desert Glimpses," lest she glimpse something she was not wanted to see. I suppose it never occurred to Tex that Mary V's peregrinations would take her within sight of Sinkhole, or that she would recognize a suspicious circumstance if she met it face to face. Mary V was still looked upon as a spoiled kid by the Rolling R boys, and she had not attained the distinction of being taken seriously by anyone save Johnny Jewel. Which may explain, in a roundabout way, why her interest had settled upon him, though Johnny's good looks and his peppery disposition may have had something to do with it too.

Mary V, having climbed to the top of Black Ridge, adjusted her field glasses and swept every bit of Sinkhole country that lay in sight. Almost immediately

she saw a suspicious circumstance, and she straightway recognized it as such. Away over to the east of Sinkhole Camp she saw two horsemen jogging along, just as the Rolling R boys jogged homeward after a hard day's work at the round-up. She could not recognize them, the distance was so great. She therefore believed that one of them might be Johnny Jewel, and the suspicion made her head ache worse than before. He had no business to be away at night, and then to go riding off somewhere with some one else so early in the morning, and she stamped her foot at him and declared that she would like to *shake* him.

She watched those two until they were hidden in one of the million or so of little " draws " or arroyos that wrinkle the face of the range west. When she finally gave up hope of seeing them again, she moved the glasses slowly to the west. Midway of the arc, she saw something that was more than suspicious ; it was out-and-out mysterious.

She saw something—what it was she could not guess—moving slowly in the direction of Sinkhole Camp, something wide and queer looking, with a horseman on either side and with a team pulling. Here again the distance was too great to reveal details. She strained her eyes, changed the focus hopefully, blurred the image, and slowly turned the little focusing wheel back again. She had just one more clear glimpse of the thing before it, too, disappeared.

Mary V waited and waited, and watched the place. If it was crossing a gully, it would climb out again, of course. When it did not do so she lost all patience and was putting the glasses in their case when she saw a speck crawling along a level bit, half a mile or so to the left of where she had been watching.

" Darn ! " said Mary V, and hastened to readjust

the glasses. But she had no more than seen that it was the very same mysterious object, only now it was not wide at all, but very long—when it crawled behind a ridge like a caterpillar disappearing behind a rock. Mary V waited awhile, but it did not show itself. So she cried with vexation and nervous exhaustion, stamped her foot, and made the emphatic assertion that she felt like *shooting* Johnny Jewel for making her come all this long way to be driven raving distracted.

After a little, when the mysterious thing still failed to reappear anywhere on the face of the grey-mottled plain, she ate what was left of her lunch and rode home, too tired to sit up straight in the saddle.

CHAPTER XI

THIEVES RIDE BOLDLY

JOHNNY JEWEL heaved his weary bones off his bed and went stiffly to answer the 'phone. Reluctantly as well, for he had not yet succeeded in formulating an excuse for his absence that he dared try on old Sudden Selmer. Excuses had seemed so much less important when temptation was plucking at his sleeve that almost any reason had seemed good enough. But now when the bell was jingling at him, no excuse seemed worth the breath to utter it. So Johnny's face was doleful, and Johnny's red-rimmed eyes were big and solemn.

And then, when he had braced himself for the news that he was jobless, all he heard was this :

" Hello ! How's everything ? "

" All right," he answered dully to that. So far as he knew, everything was all right—save himself.

" Feed holding out all right in the pasture ? " came next. And when Johnny said that it was : " Well, say ! If you get time, you might ride up and get one or two of these half-broke bronks and ride 'em a little. The boys have got a few here now that's pretty well gentled, and they're workin' on a fresh bunch. The quieter they are, the better price they'll bring, and they won't have time to ride 'em all. You can handle one or two all right, can't yuh ? "

"Yes, I guess I can," said Johnny, still waiting for the blow to fall.

"Well, how many will the pasture feed, do yuh think? You can turn out one of the couple you've got."

"Oh, there's food enough for three, all right, I guess——"

"Well, all right—there's a couple of good ones I'd like to have gentled down. Cold's better, ay?"

"I—why, I guess so." Johnny just said that from force of habit. His mind refused to react to a question which to him was meaningless. Johnny could not remember when he had last had a cold.

"Well, all right—to-morrow or next day, maybe. I'll have the boys keep up the two I want rode regular. If everything's running along smooth, you better come up and get 'em. And when they're bridlewise and all, you can bring 'em in and get more. These boys won't have time to get more'n the rough edge off . . ."

When he had hung up the receiver, Johnny sat down on a box, took his jaws between his two capable palms and thought, staring fixedly at the floor while he did so.

It took him a full twenty minutes to settle two obvious facts comfortably in his brain, but he did it at last and crawled into his bed with a long sigh of thankfulness, though his conscience hovered dubiously over those facts like a hen that has hatched out goslings and doesn't know what to do about them. One fact—the big, important one—was that Johnny still had his job, and that it looked as secure and permanent as any job can look in this uncertain world. The other fact—the little, teasingly mysterious one—was that Sudden evidently did not know of Johnny's two-days' absence from camp, and

foolishly believed Johnny the victim of a cold.

But Johnny's conscience was too much a boy's resilient fear of consequences to cluck very long over what was, on the face of it, a piece of good luck. It permitted Johnny to sleep and to dream happily all night, and it did not pester him when he awoke at daylight.

Just because it became a habit with him, I shall tell you what was the first thing Johnny did after he crawled into his clothes. He went out hastily and saddled his horse and rode to the rock-faced bluff, turned into a niche and rode back to the farther end, then swung sharply to the left.

It was there. Dusty, desert-whipped, one wing drooping sharply at the end, the flat tyre accentuating the tilt; with its tail perked sidewise like a fish frozen in the act of flipping; reared up on its landing gear with its little radiatored nose crossed rakishly by the gravel-scarred propeller, that looked as though mice had nibbled the edges of its blades, it thrilled him as it had never thrilled him before.

It was his own, bought and paid for in money, and the sweat of long, toil-filled miles. It looked bigger in that niche than it had looked out on the desert with nothing but the immensity of earth and sky to measure it by. It looked bigger, more powerful—a mechanical miracle which still seemed more dream than reality. And it was his, absolutely the sole property of Johnny Jewel, who had retrieved it from a foreign country—his prize.

"Boy! I sure do wish she was ready to take the air," Johnny said under his breath to Sandy, who merely threw up his head and stared at the thing with sophisticated disapproval.

Johnny got down and went up to it, laid a hand on the propeller, where its varnish was still smooth.

Through a rift in the rock wall a bright yellow beam of sunlight slid kindly along the padded rim of the pilot's pit ; touched Johnny's face, too, in passing.

Johnny sighed, stood back and looked long at the whole great sweep of the planes, pulled the smile out of his lips and went back to the cabin. He wouldn't have time to work on her to-day, he told himself very firmly. He would have to ride the fences like a son-of-a-gun to make up for lost time. And look over the horses, too, and ride past that boggy place in the willows. It would keep him on the jump until sundown. He wouldn't even have a chance to go over his lessons and blue prints, to see just what he'd have to send for to repair the plane. He didn't even know the name of some of the parts, he confessed to himself.

He hated to leave the place unguarded while he made his long tour of the fence and the range within. He did not trust the brother of Tomaso, who had been too easily jewed down in his price, Johnny thought. He believed old Sudden was right in having nothing to do with Mexicans, in forbidding them free access to his domain. Johnny thought it would be a good idea to do likewise. Tomaso was to bring back the pliers, hammer, and whatever other tools they had taken, but after that they would have to keep off. He would tell Tomaso so very plainly. The prejudices of the Rolling R were well enough known to need no explanation, surely.

So Johnny ate a hurried breakfast, caught his fresh horse out of the pasture, and rode off to do in one day enough work to atone for the two he had filched from the Rolling R. He covered a good deal of ground, so far as that went. He rode to the very spot where fifteen Rolling R horses had been driven through the fence and across the border, but since

his thoughts were given to the fine art of repairing a somewhat battered aeroplane, he did not observe where the staples had been pulled from three posts, the wires laid flat and weighted down with rocks, so that the horses and several horsemen could pass, and the wires afterwards fastened in place with new staples. It is true that the signs were not glaring, yet he might have noticed that the wires there were nailed too high on the posts. And if he had noticed that, he could not have failed to see where the old staples had been drawn and new ones substituted. The significance of that would have pried Johnny's mind loose from even so fascinating a subject as the amount of fabric and "dope" he would need to buy, and what would be their probable cost, "laid down" in Agua Dulce, which was the nearest railroad point.

As it was, he rode over tracks and traces and bits of sinister evidence here and there, and because the fence did not lie flat on the ground, and because many horses were scattered in the creek bottom and the draws and dry arroyos, he returned to camp satisfied that all was well on the Sinkhole range. He passed the cabin by and headed straight for his secret hangar, gloated and touched and patted and planned until the shadows crept in so thick he could not see, and then remembered how hungry he was. He returned to the cabin, turned his tired horse loose in the pasture, with Sandy standing disconsolately beside the wire gate, his haltered head drooping in the dusk and his mind visioning heat and sand and sweaty saddle blankets for the morrow.

Dark had painted out the opal tints of the afterglow. The desert lay quiet, empty, lonesome under the first stars. Johnny's eyes strained to see the ridge that held close his treasure. He had a nervous

fear that something might happen to it in the night, and he fought a desire to take his blankets and sleep over there in that niche. Tomaso's brother knew where it was, and the Mexican who had driven the mules that hauled it there. What if they tried to steal it, or something?

That night, before he went to bed, he saddled Sandy and rode over to make sure that the aeroplane was still there. He carried a lantern because he feared the moon would not shine in where it was. It was there, just as he had placed it, but Johnny could not convince himself that it was safe. He had an uneasy feeling that thieves were abroad that night, and he stayed on guard for an hour or more before he finally consoled himself with the remembrance of the difficulties to be surmounted before even the most persistent of thieves could despoil him.

After that he rode back to the cabin and studied his blue prints and his typed lessons, and made a tentative list of the materials for repairs, and hunted diligently through certain magazine advertisements, hoping to find some firm to which he might logically address the order.

Obstacles loomed large in the path of research. The Instructions for Repairing an Aeroplane (Lesson XVII) were vague as to costs and quantities and such details, and Johnny's judgment and experience were even more vague than the instructions. He gnawed all the rubber off his pencil before he hit upon the happy expedient of sending a cheque for all he could afford to spend for repairs, explaining just what damage had been wrought to his plane, and casting himself upon the experience, honesty and mercy of the supply house. Remained only the problem of discovering the name and address of the

firm to be so trusted, but that took him far past midnight.

He was just finishing his somewhat lengthy letter of explanations and directions and a passable diagram of the impertinent twist to the tail of his machine. The moon was up, wallowing through a bank of clouds that made weird shadows on the plain, sweeping across greasewood and sage and barren sand like great, ungainly troops of horsemen; filling the arroyos and the little, deep washes with inky blackness.

Up from one deep washout a close-gathered troop of shadows came thrusting forward toward the lighter slope beyond. These did not travel in one easterly direction as did those other scudding wind-driven night wraiths. They climbed straight across the wind to a bare level which they crossed, then swerved to the north, dipped into a black hollow and emerged, swinging back toward the south. A mile away a light twinkled steadily—the light before which Johnny Jewel was bending his brown, deeply cogitating head while he drew carefully the sketch of his new aeroplane's tail, using the back of a steel table knife for a rule and guessing at the general proportions.

"Midnight an' after—and he's still up and at it," chuckled one of the dim shapes, waving an arm toward the light. "Must a took it into the shack with 'm!"

Another one laughed rather loudly. Too loudly for a thief who did not feel perfectly secure in his thieving.

"Betcher we c'ud taken his saddle hoss out the pen an' ride 'im off, and he wouldn't miss 'im till he jest happened to look down and see where his boots was wore through the bottom hoofin' it!" continued

the speaker contentedly. "Me, I wisht we c'd git hold of some of them bronks they're bustin' now at the ranch. Tex was tellin' me they's shore some good ones."

"What's the good of wishin'?" a man behind him growled. "We ain't doing so worse."

"No—but broke hosses beats broomtails. Ain't no harm in wishin' they'd turn loose and bust some for us; save us that much work."

The one who had laughed broke again into a high cackle. "What we'd oughta do," he chortled, "is send 'em word to hereafter turn in lead ropes with every hoss we take off'n their hands. And by rights we'd oughta *stip*-ilate that all hosses must be broke to lead. It ain't right—them a gentlin' down everything that goes to army buyers, and us, here, havin' to take what we can git. It ain't right!"

"The kid, he'll maybe help us out on that there. I wisht Sudden 'd take a notion to turn 'em all over to this-here skyridin' fool——"

And the "skyridin' fool," at that moment carefully reading his order over the third time, honestly believed that he was watching over the interests of the Rolling R, and was respected and would presently be envied by all who heard his name. I wish he could have heard those night-riders talking about him, jeering even at the Rolling R for trusting him to guard their property. This chapter could have ended with a glorious fight out there under the moon, because Johnny would not have stopped to count noses before he started in on them.

But even though horse thieves are riding boldly and laughing as they ride, you cannot expect the bullets to fly when honest men have not yet discovered that they are being robbed. Johnny never dreamed that duty called him out on the range that night.

He went to bed with his brain a whirligig in which aeroplanes revolved dizzily, and the marauders rode unhindered to wherever they were going. Thus do dramatic possibilities go to waste in real life.

CHAPTER XII

JOHNNY'S AMAZING RUN OF LUCK STILL HOLDS ITS PACE

ON the shady side of the depot at Agua Dulce, Johnny sat himself down on a truck whose iron parts were still hot from the sun that had lately shone full upon it. With lips puckered into a soundless whistle, and fingers that trembled a little with eagerness, he proceeded to unwrap one of the parcels he had just taken from the express office. On another truck that had stood longer in the shade, a young tramp in greasy overalls and cap inhaled the last precious wisps of smoke from a cigarette burned down to an inch of stub, and watched Johnny with a glum kind of speculation. Johnny sensed his presence and the speculative interest, and read the latter as the preparation for a " touch." And Johnny was not feeling particularly charitable after having to pay a seven-dollar C.O.D. besides the express charges. He showed all the interest he felt in his packages and refused to encourage the hobo by so much as a glance.

He examined the slender ribs, bending them and slipping them through his fingers with the pleasurable feeling that he was inspecting and testing as an expert would have done. He read the label on a tin

of " dope," unwrapped a coil of wire cable and felt it, went at a parcel of unbleached linen, found the end and held a corner up to the light and squinted at it with his head perked sidewise.

Whereupon the hobo gave a limber twist of his lank body that inclined him closer to Johnny. " Say, if it's any of my business, how much did Abe Smith tax yuh for that linen ? " His tone was languid, tinged with a chronic resentment against circumstance.

Johnny turned a startled stare upon him, seemed on the point of telling him that it was not any of his business, and with the next breath yielded to his hunger for speech with a human being, however lowly, whose intelligence was able to grasp so exalted a subject as aircraft.

" Dunno yet——I'll have to look it up on the bill," he said with a cheerful indifference that implied long familiarity with such matters.

" Looks to me like some of the same lot he stung me with last fall, is why I asked. Abe will sting you every time the clock ticks. Why don't yuh send to the Pacific Supply Company ? They're real people. Got better stuff, and they'll treat you right whether you send or go yourself. Take it from me, bo, when you trade with Abe Smith you want a cop along."

Johnny fingered the linen, his face gone sober. " I told him to send the best he had in stock," he said.

" Well, maybe he done it, at that," the hobo conceded. " His stock's rotten, that's all."

" I was looking the bunch over so I could shoot it back to him if it wasn't all right," Johnny explained with dignity. " They sure can't work off any punk stuff on me, not if I know it."

The hobo flipped his cigarette stub into the sand

and stared out across the depressing huddle of adobe huts and raw, double-roofed shacks that comprised Agua Dulce. His pale eyes blinked at the glare, his mouth drooped sourly at the corners.

"Believe me, bo, if you're stranded in *this* hole with a busted plane, yuh better not take on any contract of arguing with Abe Smith. He'll stall yuh off till you forget how to fly." He turned his pale stare to Johnny with a new interest. "You aren't making a transcontinental, are you?"

"Well—n-no. Not yet, anyway. I—live here." You may not believe it, but Johnny was beginning to feel apologetic—and before a hobo, of all men.

"The deuce you do!" The tramp hitched himself up on another vertebra of his limp spine. "Why, I thought you were probably just making a cross-country flight, and had a wreck. I was going to bone yuh for a lift, in case you were alone. You *live* here! Why, for cat's sake?"

"Gawd knows," said Johnny. Then added impulsively, "I don't expect to go on living here always. I'm going to beat it, soon as I get my aeroplane repaired, and——" He was on the point of saying, "when I learn to fly it." But pride and his experience with the Rolling R boys checked him in time.

The hobo looked hungrily at the "makin's" Johnny was pulling from the pocket of his shirt. "At that you're lucky," he said. "Having a plane *to* repair. Mine's junk, and I'm just outa the hospital myself. I was a fool to ever go east, anyway. They are sure a cold proposition, believe me. Long as you're lousy with money, and making pretty flights, you're all right. But let bad luck hit yuh once—say, they don't know you any more a-tall. I was doing fine on the Coast, too, but a fellow's never

satisfied with what he's got. The game looked bigger back East, and I went. Now look at me! Bumming my way back when I planned to make a record flight! Kicked off the train in this flyspeck on the desert; nothing to eat since yesterday, not even a smoke left on me, nor the price of one!" He accepted with a nod the tobacco and papers Johnny held out to him, and proceeded languidly to roll a cigarette.

"Down to straight bumming—when I ought to be making my little old thousand dollars a flight. Maybe you've kept in touch with things on the Coast. I'm known there, well enough. Bland Halliday's my name. Here's my pilot's licence—about all them sharks didn't pry off me in the hospital! I sure do wish I had of let well enough alone! But no, I had to go get gay with myself and try and beat a sure thing."

Johnny was gazing reverently upon the pilot's licence which he held in his hand, and he did not hear the last two or three sentences of the hobo's lament. He was busy breaking one of the ten commandments, the one which says "Thou shalt not covet." That he had never heard of Bland Halliday did not disturb him, for in Arizona's wide spaces one does not hear of all that goes on in the world. He was sufficiently impressed by the licence and what it implied, and he was thinking very fast. Here was a man, down on his luck it is true, but a man who actually knew how to fly; a fellow who spoke of Smith Brothers' Supply Factory with the contempt of familiarity; a fellow who had used some of the very same linen.

Johnny Jewel forgot his pose of expert aviator. He forgot that Bland Halliday was absolutely unknown to him, and that his personality was not

altogether prepossessing. As a rule Johnny did not like pale eyes that seemed always to wear a veiled, opaque look. Heretofore he had not liked those new-fangled little moustaches which the Rolling R boys had dubbed slipped eyebrows. And ordinarily he would have objected to a mouth drawn at the corners in a permanent whine. To offset these objectionable features there were the greasy, brown overalls and the cap which certainly looked bird-mannish enough for anyone, and there was the pilot's licence —no fake about that—and the fact that the fellow had known all about Abe Smith and the linen.

Johnny threw away his cigarette and his caution together. "Say, I might be able to take you to Los Angeles, all right—provided you will take a hand on the little old boat and help me put her in shape again. It oughtn't to take long, if we go right after it. I—er—to tell the truth, it's hard to get hold of anyone around here that knows anything about it. Why, I had one fellow working for me, Mr. Halliday, and just for a joke I asked him where the fuselage was. And he went hunting all over the place and finally brought me a monkey wrench! He——"

"No brains—that's the main trouble with the game," commented Bland Halliday, after he had exhaled a long, thin wreath of smoke which he watched dreamily. "What you got?"

"Hunh? What kind of a plane? Why, it's a tractor. A military——"

"Unh-hnh. Dual dep control, or have you monkeyed with it and——?

"It's a regular military type tractor. It—well, it has been in Government service before——"

"You an army flier? Then what'n hell you doing here? Say, put over something I can take, bo. You don't look the part. Only for that stuff you

unwrapped, I'd tag you for a wild and woolly cowboy."

His tone was not flattering, and his very frank scepticism ill became a tramp. But Johnny had plunged, and he swallowed his indignation and explained with sufficient truth to be convincing. He even confessed that he could not fly—yet. There was something pathetic in his eagerness and his trustfulness, though Bland Halliday seemed to miss altogether the pathos, in his greed for technical details of the damage to the plane, and a crafty inquisitiveness as to distance and location.

He smoked another of Johnny's cigarettes, stared opaquely at the sweltering little village and meditated, while Johnny wrapped his parcels and tied them securely, and waited nervously for the decision.

";I wish I'd happened long before you sent for that stuff," Halliday remarked at last, flicking Johnny's face with a glance. " I've got a dope of my own that beats that, any way you take it—and don't cost a quarter as much. And that linen—I sure would love to cram it down old Abe Smith's gullet. Say ! You got tacks and hammer, and varnish and brushes ? If you're away off from the railroad, as you say you are, all these things must be laid in before we start work. And what about your oil and gas ? And how's the propeller ? Does she show any crack anywhere ? How far is it, anyway ? I'd like to look 'er over before I do anything about it. From all I can see, you don't know what condition the motor's in. How far is it, anyway ? I might go and take a look."

" When you take a look," said Johnny, with a flash of his old spirit, " it will be with your sleeves rolled up. If you think I'm running a sight-seeing bus, you'd better tie a can to the thought. My time

ain't my own—yet. I can get by, this trip, because the bronk I'm riding needed the exercise; or I can say he did, and it will get over. But I don't expect to be riding in to the railroad every day or so. If I get another chance in a month, I'll say I'm lucky."

"Well, I'd like to help you out all right. I can see where you're going to need it, and need it bad. Tell you what I will do, providing it suits you. I'll go over with you, and take a look at the plane. If it can be repaired without shipping it into a shop, all right! I'll help you repair it. You'll learn to fly, all right, on the way to the Coast. That is, if you've got it in you.

"And the other side of it is, if the plane can't be repaired at your camp, and you don't want to trust me to get it to a shop where I can repair it, all right. You stake me to a ticket to Los Angeles and money to eat on. It's going to be worth that to you, to know just what shape your plane's in, and what it will cost to fix it. And without handing myself any flowers, I'll say I'm as well qualified as anybody. I've built fifteen of 'em, myself. I can tell you down to the last two-bit piece what it's going to stand you to put her in shipshape condition, ready to take the air. And believe me, old top, you can throw good money away faster on an aeroplane than you can on a jamboree. I've tried both ways; I know." He leaned back on the truck and clasped his hands around one bent knee, as though, having stated his terms and his opinion, there remained nothing further for him to say or to do about it.

Johnny looked at him dubiously, did some further rapid thinking, and went to inquire of the station agent the price of a ticket to Los Angeles.

"All right, that goes," he said when he returned. "Come on and eat. We've got to do some hustling

to get back before sundown. You make out a list of what we've got to have besides this—you said hammer and tacks—and I'll see if the hardware store has got it. Lucky I brought an extra horse along to pack this stuff on. You can ride him out."

"Ride a *horse*? Me?" the spine of the expert stiffened with horror, so that he sat up straight.

"Sure, ride a horse. You. Think you were going out on the street car?" Johnny's lips puckered. "Say, it won't prove fatal. He's a nice, gentle horse. And," he added meaningly, "you'll learn to ride, all right, on the way to camp. That is, if you've got it in you."

CHAPTER XIII

MARY V CONFRONTS JOHNNY

JOHNNY was in one of his hurry-up moods now. He had the material to repair his plane, he had the aviator who could help him far, far better than could his cold-blooded, printed instructions. Remained only the small matter of annihilating time and distance so that the work could start.

In his zeal Johnny nearly annihilated the aviator as well. He rode fast for two reasons: He was in a great hurry to get back to camp, and he had a long way to go; and the long-legged, half-broken bronk he was riding was in a greater hurry than Johnny, and did not care how far he had to go. So far as they two were concerned, the pace suited. But Sandy refused to be left behind, and he also objected to a rider that rode soggily, ka-lump, ka-lump, like a bag of meal tied to the horn with one saddle string. Sandy pounded along with his ears laid flat against his skull, for spite keeping to the roughest gait he knew, short of pitching. Bland Halliday pounded along in the saddle, tears of pain in his opaque eyes, caused by having bitten his tongue twice.

"For cat's sake, is this the only way of getting to your camp?" he gasped, when Johnny and the bronk mercifully slowed to climb a steep arroyo bank.

"Unless yuh fly," Johnny assured him happily,

hugging the thought that, however awkward he might be when he first essayed to fly, it would be humanly impossible to surpass the awkwardness of Bland Halliday in the saddle.

"Believe me, bo, we'll fly, then, if I have to *build* a plane!" Halliday let go the saddle horn just long enough to draw the back of his grimy wrist across his perspiring face. "And I've heard folks claim they *liked* to ride on a horse!" he added perplexedly.

Johnny grinned and turned off the road to ride straight across the country. It would be rough going for the aviator, but it would shorten the journey ten or twelve miles, which meant a good deal to Johnny's peace of mind.

He did not feel it necessary to inform his expert assistant that Sinkhole Camp was accessible to wagons, carts, buckboards—automobiles, even, if one was lucky in dodging rocks, and the tyres held out. It had occurred to him that it might be very good policy to make this a trip of unpleasant memories for Bland Halliday. He would work on that plane with more interest in the job. The alternative of a ticket and "eating money" to Los Angeles had been altogether too easy, Johnny thought. There should be certain obstacles placed between Sinkhole and the ticket.

So he placed them there with a thoroughness that lathered the horses, tough as they were. Johnny Jewel knew his Arizona—let it go at that.

"Say, bo, do we have to ride down in there?" came a wail from behind when Johnny's horse paused to choose the likeliest place to jump off a three-foot rim of rock that fenced a deep gash.

"Yep—ride or fly. Why? This ain't bad," Johnny chirped, never looking around.

"Honest to Pete, I'm ready to croak right now!

I can loop and I can write my initials in fire on a still night—but damned if I do a nose-dive with nothing but a horse under me. He—his control's on the blink! He don't balance to suit me. Aw, say! Lemme walk! Honest——"

"And get snake-bit?" Johnny glanced back and waved his hand airily just as his horse went over like a cat jumping off a fence. "Come on! Let your horse have his head. He'll make it."

"Me? I ain't got his head! Sa-ay, where's——" He trailed off into a mumble, speaking always from the viewpoint of a flyer. Johnny, listening while he led the way down a blind trail to the bottom, caught a word now and then and decided that Bland Halliday must surely be what he claimed to be, or he would choose different terms for his troubles. He would not, for instance, be wondering all the while what would happen if Sandy did a side-slip; nor would he have openly feared a "pancake" at the landing.

Johnny let the horses drink at a water hole, permitted the fellow five minutes or so in which to make sure that he was alive and that aches did not necessarily mean broken bones, and led the way on down that small cañon and out across the level toward another gulch, heading straight for Sinkhole much as a burdened ant goes through, over or under whatever lies in its path.

It was a very good way to reach home quickly, but it had one drawback which Johnny could not possibly have foreseen. It brought him face to face with Mary V without any chance at all of retreating unseen or making a detour.

The three horses stopped, as range horses have a habit of doing when they meet like that. The riders stared for a space. Then Bland Halliday turned his

attention to certain raw places on his person, trying to ease them by putting all his weight on what he termed the foot-controls. Even a pretty girl could not interest him very much just then, and Mary V, I must confess, was not looking as pretty as she sometimes looked.

"Well, Johnny Jewel!" said Mary V disapprovingly. "*What* have you there?"

"Well, Mary V! *What* are you doing here?" Johnny echoed promptly, choosing to ignore her question.

"What is that to you, may I ask?" Mary V challenged him.

"What is the other to you, may I ask?" Johnny retorted.

Deadlocked, they looked at each other and tried not to let their eyes smile.

"You're all over your cold, I see," said Mary V meaningly. "You didn't come after all to ride with me last Sunday, although you promised to come."

"Promised? I did? Well, what did you expect? Not me—I'll bet on it." Johnny had been nearly caught, but he recovered himself in time, he believed.

"I expected you wouldn't know the first thing about it—which you didn't. Oh, there's something here I want to show you." She tilted her head backward, and gave him a warning scowl, and rode slowly away.

Johnny followed, uncomfortably mystified. She did not go more than fifty yards—just out of the hearing of the stranger. She stopped and pointed her finger at a rock which was like any other rock in that locality.

"What is that fellow doing here? He can't ride. I saw you, when you came out of the cañon, so he

isn't a new hand. And why did somebody answer your telephone for you, and pretend he had a cold so dad wouldn't know he was a stranger? Dad didn't, for that matter, but *I* knew, the very first words he spoke. And what are you up to, Johnny Jewel? You better tell me, because I shall find out anyway."

"Go to it!" Johnny defied her. "If you're going to find out anyway, what's the use of me telling yuh?"

"Who was it answered your 'phone? You better tell me that, because if I were to just *hint* to dad——"

"What would you hint? I've been answering the 'phone pretty regularly, seems to me. And can't I have a cold and get over it if I want to? And can't I fool you with my voice? You'd pine away if you didn't have some mystery to mill over. You ought to be glad——"

"You weren't at Sinkhole Camp that night I 'phoned." Mary V looked at him accusingly.

"Oh, *weren't* I?" Johnny took refuge in mockery. "How do you know?"

Naturally, Mary V disliked to tell him how she knew. She shied from the subject. "You're the most *secretive* thing; you are doing something dad doesn't know about, but you ought to know better than to think you can fool *me*. Really, I should not like to see you get into trouble with my father, even though——"

"Even though I am merely your father's hired man. I get you, perfectly. Why not let papa's hired man take care of himself?"

Mary V flushed angrily. Johnny was reminding her of the very beginning of their serial quarrel, when he had overheard her telling a girl guest at the ranch that Johnny Jewel was "only one of my

father's hired men." Mary V had not been able to explain to Johnny that the girl guest had exhibited altogether too great an interest in his youth and his good looks, and had frankly threatened a flirtation. The girl guest was something of the snob, and Mary V had taken the simplest, surest way of squelching her romantic interest. She had done that effectually, but she had also given Johnny Jewel a mortal wound in the very vitals of his young egotism.

"We are so short-handed this season!" Mary V explained sweetly. "And dad is so stubborn, he'd fire the last man on the ranch if he caught him doing things he didn't like. And if he doesn't get all the horses broken and sold that he has set his heart on selling, he says he won't be able to buy me a new car this fall. There's the *dearest* little sport Norman that I want——"

"Hope you get it, I'm sure. I'll take an aeroplane for mine. In the meantime, you're holding up a hired hand when he's in a hurry to get on the job again. That won't get you any sport Normans, nor buy gas for the one you've got."

"That man——" Mary V lowered her voice worriedly. "I know something nasty and unpleasant about him. I can't remember what it is, but I shall. I've seen him somewhere. What is he doing here? You might tell me that much."

"Why, he's going to stay overnight with me. Maybe a little longer. I'm willing to pay for all he eats, if that——"

"Shame on you! Why *must* you be so perfectly intolerable? I hope he stays long enough to steal the coat off your back. He's a crook. He couldn't be anything else, with those eyes."

"Poor devil can't change the colour of his eyes"; but that's a girl's reason, every time. You better be fanning for home, Mary V. You've no business out this far alone. I think I'll have to put your dad wise to the way you drift around promiscuous. You can't tell when a stray greaser might happen along. No, I mean it! You're always kicking about my doing things I shouldn't; well, you've got to quit riding around alone the way you do. What if I had been somebody else—a greaser, maybe?"

Mary V had seen Johnny angry, often enough, but she had never seen just that look in his eyes; a stern anxiety that rather pleased her.

"Why, I should have said '*Como esta Vd,*' and ridden right along. If he had been half as disagreeable as you have been, I expect maybe I'd have shot him. Go on home to Sinkhole, why don't you? I'm sure *I* don't enjoy this continual bickering." She rode five steps away from him, and pulled up again. "Of course you want me to tell dad you have a—a guest at Sinkhole Camp?"

Johnny gave a little start, opened his lips and closed them. Opened them again and said, "You'll suit yourself about that—as usual." If she thought he would beg her to keep this secret or any other, she was mistaken.

"Oh, thank you so much. I shall tell him, then—of course."

She gave her head a little tilt that Johnny knew of old, and rode away at as brisk a trot as Tango could manage on that rough ground.

"Some chicken!" Bland Halliday grinned wryly when Johnny waved him to come on. "Great place to keep a date, I must say."

Johnny turned upon him furiously. "You cut

that out—quick! Or hoof it back to the railroad after I've licked the stuffin' outa you. That girl is a real girl. You don't need to speak to her or about her. She ain't your kind."

CHAPTER XIV

JOHNNY WOULD SERVE TWO MASTERS

BLAND HALLIDAY objected to rising with the sun. In fact, he objected to rising at all. He groaned a great deal, and he swore with great fluency and complained of excruciating pains here and there. The only thing to which he did not object was eating the breakfast that Johnny had cooked. And since Johnny could not remember the time when riding had been really painful, and therefore discounted the misery of his guest, he refused to concede the point of Bland Halliday's inability to get up and go about the business for which he had come so far.

"Aw, you'll be all right when you stir around a little," was the scant comfort he gave. "It's a good big half-mile over to where I've got it cached. A ride'll limber you up——"

"Ride? On a horse? Not on your life! honest, old top, I'm all in; I couldn't walk if you was to pay me a million a step. On the square, bo——"

"Say, I wish you'd cut out that 'bo' and 'old top' and call me Johnny. That's my name. And I wish you'd cut out the misery talk too. Why, good golly! What do you think I brought yuh down here for? Just to give you a ride? I've got an aeroplane to repair, and you claimed you could repair it. If

you do, I promised to take you to the Coast with it. That's the understanding, and she still rides that way. Get up and come eat. We've got to get busy. I ain't taking summer boarders."

"Aw, have a heart, bo——"

Johnny's code was simple and direct, and therefore effective. He had brought this fellow to Sinkhole for a purpose, and he did not intend to be thwarted in that purpose just because the man happened to be a whiner. Johnny went over to the bunk, grabbed Bland Halliday by a shoulder and a leg, and hauled him into the middle of the cabin.

"Maybe you can fly; you sure don't hit me as being good for anything else," he said in deep disgust. "And I wouldn't be surprised right now to hear you swiped that pilot's licence. If you did, and if you don't know aeroplanes, the Lord help yuh —that's all I got to say. Get into your pants. I'm in a hurry this morning."

Bland Halliday nearly cried, but he managed to insert his aching limbs into his trousers, and somehow he managed to move to the washbasin, and afterwards to hobble to the table. He let himself down by slow and painful degrees into a chair, swore that he'd lie on the track and let a train run over him before he would sit again on the back of a horse, and began to eat voraciously.

Johnny listened, watched the food disappear, gave a snort, and fried more bacon for himself. His mood was not optimistic that morning. He was not even hopeful. He had held an exalted respect for aviators, believing them all supermen, gifted beyond the common herd and certainly owning a fine valour, a gameness that surpassed the best courage of men content to remain close to earth. He had brought Bland Halliday away down here only to find that he

lacked all the fine qualities which Johnny had taken for granted he possessed.

"Say! On the square, did you ever get any farther away from the ground than an elevator could take you?" he asked bluntly, when he was finishing his coffee after a heavy silence.

"Ten thousand feet—well, once I went twelve, but I didn't stay up. There was a heavy cross-current up there, and I didn't stay. Why?"

Johnny looked him over with round, unfriendly eyes. "I was just wondering," he said. "You seem so scared about getting on the back of a horse——"

"You ain't doing me justice," the aviator protested. "Every fellow to his own game. I never was on a horse's back before, and I'll say I hope I never get on one again. But that ain't saying I can't fly, because I can, and I'll prove it if you lead me to something I can fly with."

"I'll lead you—right now. You can ride that far, can't you?"

Bland Halliday thought he would prefer to walk, which he did, slowly and with much groaning complaint. Earth and sky were wonderful with the blush of sunrise, but he never gave the miracle a thought.

Nor did Johnny, for that matter. Johnny was leading Sandy, packed with the repair stuff and a makeshift camp outfit for the aviator. He had decided, during breakfast, to put Bland Halliday in the niche with the aeroplane, and leave him there. He had three very good reasons for doing that, and ridding himself of Bland's incessant whining was not the smallest, though the necessity of keeping Bland's presence a secret from the Rolling R loomed rather large, as did Johnny's desire to have some one

always with the plane. He had no fear that Halliday would do anything but his level best at the repairing. He also reasoned that he would prove a faithful, if none too courageous watch-dog. That aeroplane was Bland's one hope of escape from the country, since riding horseback was so unpopular a mode of travel with him.

Thinking these things, Johnny looked back at the unhappily plodding birdman and grinned.

He was not grinning when he rode away from the niche more than an hour later, though he had reason for feeling encouraged. Bland Halliday did know aeroplanes. He had proved that almost with his first comment when he limped around the plane, looking her over. His whole manner had changed; his personality, even. He was no longer the spineless, whining hobo; he was a man, alert, critical, sure of himself and his ability to handle the job before him. Johnny's manner toward him changed perceptibly. He even caught himself addressing him as Mr. Halliday, and wanting to apologize for his treatment of the aviator that morning.

"We'll have to have a new strut here. You didn't get one in that outfit. And by rights we need a new propeller. There ain't the same thrust when it's gravel-chewed like that. But maybe you can't stand the expense, so we'll try and make this do for awhile. Say," he added abruptly, turning his pale stare upon Johnny, "for cat's sake, how d'yuh figure I'm going to replace them broken cables without a brazing outfit?"

Johnny didn't know, of course. "I guess we can manage somehow," he hazarded loftily.

"A hell of a lot you know about flying!" Bland Halliday snorted. "A lot of cable to fit, and no blow-torch, and you tell me we can manage!"

"Every fellow to his own game," Johnny retorted, feeling himself slipping from his sure footing of superiority. "I can ride, anyway."

"Well, I'll say I can fly. Don't you forget that. And here's where you take orders from me, bo. I took 'em from you yesterday. Got pencil and paper? I'll just make you out a list of what's needed here. And you get it here quick as possible."

"Well, I can't ride into town for a week, anyway. I've got to——"

"That's your funeral, what you got to do. I've got to have the stuff to work with, and I've got to have it right off. At that, there's two weeks' work here, even if the motor's all right. I haven't looked 'er over yet—but seeing the gas tank is empty, I'm guessing she run as long as she had anything to run on, and that they landed for lack of gas. If that's the case, the motor's probably all right. I'll turn 'er over and see, soon as you get gas and oil down here. And that better be right off. I can be working on the tail in the meantime. But believe me, it's going to be fierce, working without half tools enough." Then he added, fixing Johnny with his unpleasant stare, "You'll have to hustle that stuff along. I'll be ready for it before it gets here, best you can do. Send to the Pacific Supply Company. Here, I'll write down the address. Better send 'em —lessee, a minute. Gimme the list again. You send 'em thirty bucks; what's left, if there is any, they'll return. Some of that stuff may have gone up since I bought last. War's boosting everything, All right—get a move on yuh, bo. This is going to be some job, believe me!"

"All right. There's grub and blankets for you. You'll have to camp right here, I guess. I don't aim to let the whole country know I've got an aeroplane—

and besides, it will save the walk back and forth from your work. I'll see you again this evening."

Bland Halliday looked around him at the blank rock walls and opened his mouth for protest. But Johnny was in the saddle and gone, and even when Halliday cried, "Aw, say!" after him he did not look back. He followed Johnny to the mouth of the cleft and stood there looking after him with a long face until Johnny disappeared into a slight depression, loped out again and presently became, to the aviator's eyes, an indistinguishable, wavering object against the sky line. Whereupon Bland gazed no more, but went thoughtfully back to his task.

It was some time after that when Mary V, riding up on a ridge a mile or so north of the stage road that linked a tiny village in the foothills with the railroad, stopped to reconnoitre before going farther. Reconnoitring had come to be so much of a habit with Mary V that every little height meant merely a vantage point from which she might gaze out over the country to see what she could see.

She gazed now, and she saw Johnny Jewel—or so she named the rider to herself—hover briefly beside the Sinkhole mail box nailed to a post beside the stage road, and then go loping back toward the south as though he were in a great hurry. Mary V watched him for a minute, turned to survey the country to the south-west, and discerned far off on the horizon a wavering speck which she rightly guessed was the stage.

She rode straight down the ridge to the mail box, grimly determined to let no little clue to Johnny Jewel's insufferable behaviour escape her. Johnny was up to something, and it might be that the mail box was worth inspecting that morning. So Mary V rode up and inspected it.

There was not much, to be sure; merely a letter addressed to the Pacific Supply Company at Los Angeles. Mary V held it to the sun and learned nothing further, so she flipped the letter back into the box and rode on, following the tracks Johnny's horse had made in the loose soil. She was so busy wondering what Johnny was ordering, and why he was ordering it, that she had almost reached Sinkhole Camp before it occurred to her that Johnny had that unpleasant stranger with him, and that it might be awkward meeting the two of them without any real excuse. Johnny himself knew enough not to expect any excuse for her behaviour. Strangers were different.

But she need not have worried, for the cabin was empty. Since Johnny had not washed the dishes, Mary V observed that two persons had breakfasted. She observed also that Johnny had been in so great a hurry to get that letter to the mail box ahead of the stage that he had unceremoniously pushed all the dishes to one side of the table to make space for writing. She picked up a paper on which an address that matched the letter in the mail box and various items were scribbled, in a handwriting unlike Johnny's, and she studied those items curiously. It was like a riddle. She could not see what possible use Johnny could have for a quart of cabinet glue, for instance, or for a blow-torch, or soldering iron, or brass wire, or for any of the other things named in the list. She saw that the amount totalled a little over twenty-five dollars, and she considered that a very extravagant sum for a boy in Johnny's humble circumstances to spend for a lot of junk which she could see no sense in at all.

Having set herself to the solving of a mystery, she examined carefully the blue print laid uppermost on

a thin pile of his lessons and circulars. There were pencil markings here and there which seemed to indicate a special interest in certain parts of an aeroplane. There was a letter, too, from Smith Brothers Supply Factory. She hesitated before she withdrew the letter from the envelope, for reading another's mail was going rather far, even for Mary V in her ruthless quest of clues. But it was not a personal letter, which of course made a difference. She finally read it; twice, to be exact.

Its meaning was not clear to Mary V, but she saw that it had to do with aeroplanes, or at least with certain parts of an aeroplane. She wondered if Johnny Jewel was crazy enough to try and make himself a flying machine, away down here miles and miles from any place, and when he did not know the first thing about it. Perhaps that horrid man he had brought was going to help.

"Bland Halliday!" she said abruptly, memory flashing the name that fitted the personality she so disliked. "I *knew* I had seen him. That—whatever made Johnny Jewel take up with *him*, for gracious sake? I suppose he's persuaded Johnny to build a flying machine—the silly idiot! Well!"

She waited as long as she dared, meaning to give Johnny some much-needed advice and a warning or two. She planned exactly what she would say, and how she would for once avoid quarrelling with him. It would be a good plan, she thought, to appeal to his conscience—if he had one, which she rather doubted. She would point out to him, in a kind, firm tone, that his first duty, indeed, his only duty, lay in serving the Rolling R faithfully. Trying to build flying machines on the sly was not serving the Rolling R, and Johnny could not fail to see it once she pointed it out to him.

But Johnny was far afield, appeasing his conscience by riding the range and locating the horse herds. He did not return to camp at noon, for he found it physically impossible to ride past the rock wall without turning into the niche to see what Bland Halliday was doing, and to make sure that the aeroplane was a reality and not one of his dreams.

Bland was down under the corner of the damaged wing, swearing to himself and tacking linen to mend the jagged hole broken through the covering by the skid. He ducked his head and peered out at Johnny morosely.

"Get down here and I'll show yuh how to do this, so I can go at that tail. I just wanted to get it started, so I could turn it over to you—in case you ever showed up again!"

"I haven't time now to help," Johnny demurred. "I've got a big strip of country to ride, this afternoon. The horses are scattered——"

"Say, listen here, bo. You've got a big strip of linen to tack this afternoon, and don't overlook that fact. Fast as we can, I want to get it on so the dope can be hardening. I've figured out how we can save time, so if the motor's all right, we can maybe get outa this damn country in ten days. If you don't lay down on the job, that is, and make me do it all." He crawled out and got stiffly to his feet, rubbing a cramped elbow and eyeing Johnny sourly.

"Can't help it, Bland; I've got other work to-day. Boss'll fire me if I don't make——"

"For cat's sake, what do I care about the boss? You're going to quit anyway, ain't you, soon as we're ready to fly?"

"We-ell, yes, of course. But I'd have to give him time to get some one in my place. They're working short-handed as it is. I couldn't just——"

"You're laying down on me; that's what you're doing. Look how I've sweat all forenoon on that darned wing! Got the frame fixed, all ready for the linen to go back on; I've *worked* to-day, if anybody should ask you! Oughta have that glue, but I'm making out with what little old Abe sent. And you ain't lifted a hand. It ain't right. I can't do it *all*, and you ride around once in a while to stall me off with how busy you are. You better can that stuff, and take a hand here."

"Well, don't cry about it. I'll tack that linen on, if that's all that's worrying you. But I can't stay long; I've spent too much time already away from my work. I oughta been riding yesterday, by rights."

Bland Halliday looked at him queerly. "Me, I'd call that riding, what we done," he retorted grimly. "I'm so sore I can hear my muscles squeak. Well, get down here and I'll show yuh how to stretch as yuh tack. And be sure you don't leave a hairsbreadth of slack anywhere, or it'll all have to come off and be done over again."

So that is where Johnny was, while Mary V waited for him at the cabin and puzzled her brain over his mysterious actions, and composed her speech —and afterwards lost her temper.

It was three o'clock before Johnny finally finished to the aviator's grudging satisfaction what had looked to be a scant half-hour's work. Mary V had gone home, and it was too late for Johnny to catch a fresh mount and make the ride he had intended to make. He made coffee and fried bacon and ate a belated lunch with Halliday, and then, since the afternoon was half gone, he let himself be persuaded—badgered would be a better word—into spending the rest of the daylight helping Bland.

If his conscience buzzed nagging little reminders of his real duty, Johnny's imagination and his ambition were fed a full meal of anticipation, and he had the joy of being actually at work on an aeroplane that he could proudly speak of as "my plane."

But conscience nagged all the evening. He really must get out on the range to-morrow no matter how urgent Bland Halliday made the work appear. He really must look over that other bunch of horses, and ride the west fence. Ab-so-lutely without fail, that must be done.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIRE THAT MADE THE SMOKE

MARY V, watching from that convenient ridge which commanded the Sinkhole mail box and the faint trail leading from it to the camp, saw the home-coming stage stop there. Through her glasses she saw the horses stretching their sweaty necks away from their burdensome collars, and then stand hipshot, thankful for the brief rest. She saw the driver descend stiffly from the seat, walk around to the back of the vehicle and, with some straining, draw out what appeared to be a box the size and shape of a case of tinned kerosene. He carried it with some labour to the mail box, tilted it on end behind the post, and returned to the rig for two other boxes exactly like the first one. He fumbled for Johnny's canvas mail sack—a new luxury of Johnny's—and stuffed it into the mail box. Then, climbing wearily back to the driver's seat, he picked up the lines, released the brake, and started on.

Mary V gave the stage no further attention. She was wondering what in the world Johnny Jewel wanted with three whole cases of coal oil—if that was what the boxes contained. Mary V was not, of course, disposed to stand long on a hill and wonder. The stage was not out of sight before she was riding down the ridge.

"Gasolene!" she ejaculated, kicking a box tentatively with a booted foot. "For gracious sake, what does that boy want with five—ten—with *thirty* gallons of gas? Why that's enough to drive a car from here to Yuma, just about. Surely to goodness Johnny hasn't——"

Tango lifted his head, pointed both ears forward and nickered a languid howdy to another horse. Mary V turned quickly, a bit guiltily, and confronted Johnny himself, riding up with something dragging rigidly from the saddle to the ground behind Sandy's heels. The confusion in Johnny's face served to restore somewhat the poise which Mary V had felt slipping.

"Hello, Skyrider," she greeted him chirpily. "Unless Venus has a filling station, you'll need more gas than this, won't you, for the round trip? Or—isn't it to be a round trip?"

Johnny's eyes flew wide open. Then he laughed to cover his embarrassment. "You're not up on skyriding, are you, Mary V? I'll have to train you a little. I expect to 'vollup, bank and la-and,' coming back."

"Poor Bud isn't singing to-day. A bronk slammed him against the fence and hurt his leg so he's going around with a limp. What is that contraption, for gracious sake?"

"That? Why, that's a travois. You ask Sandy what it is, though, and he'll give you a different name, I reckon. Sandy's beginning to think life is just one thing after another. But he's getting educated."

Surreptitiously they eyed each other.

"Why do you buy your gas that way?" Mary V inquired with extreme casualness. "It's a lot cheaper if you get a drum, the way we do."

"I know; but it's a lot harder to handle a drum too. Besides——" Johnny broke his speech abruptly, hiding his confusion by straining to carry a case over to the travois.

Mary V studied his reply carefully, keeping silence until Johnny had loaded the other cases and was roping them to the travois frame.

"Is that Bland Halliday with you yet?" she asked him suddenly.

"Yeh—er—how do *you* know anything about Bl—" Johnny was plainly swept off his guard.

"Why, why shouldn't I know about Bl.?" Mary V's smile was exasperating. "I've seen Bland Halliday fly—and fall, too, once. Because he was drunk, they said. I've seen him drunk, and trying to do figure eights with a car on Wilshire Boulevard. He almost put me in the ditch, trying to dodge him. He was arrested for that, and his car was taken away from him. And I've heard—oh, all kinds of scandal about him. I was awfully surprised at your taking up with him. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Johnny Jewel."

"He sure knows aeroplanes," Johnny blurted out.

"Yours must be ready to fly—the amount of gas you're taking to camp."

"She goes in the air—say, good golly, Mary V! How do *you* know anything about my—er——"

"I hope," said Mary V very mildly, "that I have *some* brains. At any rate, I have brains enough to wonder how in the world you can afford to build yourself an aeroplane; I haven't heard a word about any rich uncle dying and leaving you a fortune. And I know it takes a tremendous lot of money to build and fly aeroplanes."

"Didn't set me back so much," Johnny bragged. "I didn't have to build one, you see."

Mary V needed time enough to study that statement also. She mounted Tango and waited until Johnny was ready to start with his queer load. "How did you get it—if I may ask?" she began then. "Did Bland Halliday happen along and have a wreck, and sell you the pieces? You want to be careful, because I know he's an awful grafter, and he'll cheat you, just as sure as you live, Skyrider."

"He can't," Johnny declared with confidence. "He's working for his passage—er——"

"Er—yes?" Mary V smiled demurely. "You may just as well tell me the whole thing, now. *Have* you got an aeroplane? Really truly? I mean, where did you get it? I know, of course, you must have one, or you wouldn't buy all that gas."

"Some deductionist," grinned Johnny, tickled with the very human interest he had roused in himself and his doings. "Where I got it is a secret—but I've got it, all right!"

"Johnny Jewel! You didn't let that Bland Halliday sell you——"

"I picked Bland Halliday up at the station in Agua Dulce," Johnny explained tolerantly. "He'd wrecked his plane back east somewhere. He was beating his way to the Coast, and was waiting to hit a freight. They'd dumped him off there. It was just pure luck. I had some stuff for repairing mine, and he saw me undo it and started talking. I saw he knew the game" (Johnny's tone would have amused the birdman!) "and when he showed me his pilot's licence, I got him to help me. That's where Bland Halliday comes in—just helping me get 'er ready to fly. And he's going to teach me. You say you've seen him fly, so——"

"Oh, he can fly," Mary V admitted slightingly. "But he's so tricky, so—so absolutely impossible!

A girl friend of mine has a brother that goes in for that sort of thing. I think he invented something that goes on a motor, or something. And I know he was terribly cheated by Bland Halliday. I think Bland borrowed a lot of money, or used a lot that was intended for something else—anyway, Jerry just hates the *name* of Bland Halliday. I didn't know him that day I met him with you, because they look so different all togged up to fly. But I remembered him afterwards, and I was going to warn you, only," she looked at Johnny sidelong, "you're a very difficult person to warn, or to do anything with. You are always so—so pugnacious!"

"I like that," said Johnny, in a tone that meant he did not like it at all.

"Well, you always argue and disagree with a person. Besides," she added vaguely, "you weren't there. And I can't be riding every day to Sinkhole."

"You could have seen me when I took those last horses back the other day," Johnny reminded her. "You did see me, only you pretended to be blind. Deaf, too, for I hollered hello when I passed, and you never looked around!"

"Did you?" Mary V smiled innocently. "Well, I'm here now; and I came just on purpose to warn you about that fellow. And you haven't told me the stingiest little bit about your aeroplane yet, or where you got it, or what you're going to do with it, or anything."

Johnny's lips twitched humorously. "I got it where it was setting like a hawk—a broken-winged hawk—on the burning sands of Mexico. I hauled it over here with four of the orneriest mules that ever flapped an ear at white men. It cost me just sixty dollars, all told—not counting repairs. And I'm

going to ride the sky, and part the clouds like foam——"

"'And brand each star with the Rolling R,
An-dlead the Great Bear ho-ome,"

Mary V chanted promptly. "Oh, Skyrider, won't you take me along too? I've always been just *dying* to fly!"

"You'll have to stave off death till I learn how—and then maybe you'll wish you hadn't."

"Oh, won't the boys be just *wild!* Where have you got it, Johnny? I've looked every place I could think of, the last two weeks, and I couldn't——"

"Oh—*hoh!*" cried Johnny. "So it was you I've been trailing, was it? I wondered who was doing so much riding down this way. You had me guessing, and that's a fact."

"Well, you've had me; now 'fess up the whole mystery of it, Johnny. You *know* that wasn't you, telephoning with a cold, that night. You know very well you weren't at camp at all; not for a couple of days, anyway. Probably that was while you went to the burning sands of Mexico. I don't understand that part, either; how you found out, and all. But who was it 'phoned for you? There were things he said——"

"Huh? What things? On the square, I don't know, Mary V. I never told anybody to 'phone—nobody knew I was going, except a greaser that told me about the plane, and went with me to see it."

"Well, I don't understand it at all. He certainly pretended he was you, and he must have 'phoned from Sinkhole, because there's no other 'phone on that wire. And the way he talked——"

"Oh, I think I know who it could have been," Johnny interposed hastily, thinking of Tomaso. "He——"

Just then the travois hung itself on a lava outcropping which Sandy himself had dodged with his feet, and Johnny had a few busy minutes. By the time they were again moving forward, Mary V's curiosity had seized upon something else. She wanted to know if Johnny wasn't afraid Bland Halliday might steal his aeroplane and fly off with it in the night.

"Well, he might, at that—if he got a chance," Johnny admitted. "Which he won't—take it from me."

"Which he will—take it from you, if you don't keep an eye on him. From all Jerry said about him, he couldn't be honest to save his life. And I'm sure Jerry——"

"Good golly! You sure do seem to bank a lot on this Jerry person. At that, he may be wrong. Bland Halliday is all right if you treat him right. I ought to know; I've worked right alongside him for over two weeks now. And I'll say he has *worked!* I'd have been all summer doing what he's done in a couple of weeks; and then it wouldn't have been done right. This said Jerry is welcome to his opinions, and you're welcome to swallow them whole, but me, I've got to hand it to Bland Halliday for sticking right on the job and doing his level best. Why, he couldn't have gone after the job any harder if it was his own plane."

"Which he probably intends that it shall be," Mary V retorted. "Before he does fly off with it, I might like to take a look at it—and a picture. May I, if you please, Mr. Jewel?"

"On one condition only, Miss Selmer. You must promise that you won't show the picture to a living soul till I give the word."

"Well, for gracious sake! How is the photo-

grapher going to develop and print it without seeing it?"

"I mean—you know what I mean. Come on, we'll swing over this way. I've got it cached in a secret hangar, over in that ledge. I've got to haul the gas over there, anyway, and you may go along if you like.'

With a surprising docility Mary V accepted the somewhat patronizing invitation. Perhaps she really appreciated the fact that Johnny was proving how much confidence he had in her. Presently she urged that confidence to further disclosures. What did he really and truly intend to do with his aeroplane, after he had learned to fly?

"Well, I promised Bland I'd take him to the Coast. I intend to make aviation my real profession, of course. You surely didn't think, Mary V, that I'd be satisfied to bog down in a job that just barely pays living wages? It's all right for fellows like Bud and Curley and Bill, maybe; but I couldn't go on all my life riding bronks and mending fence and such as that. I've just got to ride the sky, and that's all there is to it. Luck happened to come my way, so I can do it a little sooner than I expected; but I'd have done it anyway, soon as the way was clear.

"Aviation is the coming game, Mary V, and it's my game. Why, look what they're doing over in France! And if this country should get let in for a fight, wouldn't they need flyers? I'm not like Bland: I don't just look at it as furnishing thrills to a crowd that is watching to see you break your neck. Exhibition flying is all right, for a side line. But me, I'm going to go after something bigger than the amusement end. I—" his eyes grew round and dreamy, his lips quivering with all the wonderful future he saw before him, "I've thought maybe

France or England might want me and my plane—to help lick those Germans. Honest Mary, V, their work is awful raw—blowing up passenger ships and killing children and women—and, of course, we aren't doing anything much about it ; but if my little old boat could maybe bring down just one of those raiders that fly over England and drop bombs on houses where there's kids and women, I'd be willing to call it a day ! "

" B-but that's dangerous, Johnny ! You—you'd be killed, and—and it's so much finer to go on living and doing a little good right along every day. It would count up more—in the long run. And we're neutral. I—I don't think you ought to ! "

" Why not ? That's the biggest thing the world has ever seen or will see. The men that are in it—look what they're doing ! It's tremendous, Mary V ! It would be hitting a wallop for civilization."

" It would be getting yourself killed ! And then what ? What good is civilization to you after you're all smashed to pieces ? You—you wouldn't be a drop in the bucket, Johnny Jewel ! If it was our war—but to go and butt in on something away over there is absolutely foolish. What if you got one ? You couldn't get them all, and there'd be a dozen to take its place.

" But that's the way it goes. You get a streak of perfectly unbelievable good luck, and have an aeroplane just practically drop into your hands, and then you spoil it all by wanting to do some crazy thing that is absolutely idiotic. I should think you'd be contented with what you've got ; but no, you must take your aeroplane right straight over to Europe and let the Germans smash it all to pieces and kill you and everything. Why, I never *heard* of anything so absolutely imbecile as that ! "

"Well, I haven't gone yet," Johnny reminded her. "Maybe the thing won't fly at all, and maybe I'll break my neck learning to run it. So it's kinda early in the day to get excited about my going to France."

"The idea! I'm not a bit excited. It really doesn't concern me at all, personally, whether you go or not. But it does look to me like a terribly silly idea. Any person with fair reasoning faculties would argue against such idiocy, just as a matter of—of——"

"Of course. Let it ride that way. Would you think, just to look along this ledge, Mary V, that a real military tractor was cached away in it? Talk about luck! You wait till you see the place I've got for it."

Mary V seemed unimpressed. "If I might venture to advise you on a subject that has no personal interest for me," she countered primly, "I would suggest that you hide most of that gas in one of these niches, and take only one can at a time to wherever your aeroplane is. I tell you, Bland Halliday is *not* to be trusted. You say he was broke and had lost his machine in a wreck or something, and was beating his way to the Coast. The truth probably is that he lost it some other way—maybe borrowed money on it and couldn't pay it back. That's what he always does, and then gets drunk and spends it all. But just as sure as you live, he'll steal your machine if he gets a chance. And once he's in the air—you can't chase him up there, you know. And you couldn't *prove* it was your aeroplane afterwards, could you? You haven't any papers or anything; you said it was 'finders, keepers.' And he could claim that he found it himself, couldn't he?"

She looked at Johnny's sobering face, with the

pursed lips and the crease between his eyes that told of worry. Bland Halliday, once he was in the air, would be master of the situation. Johnny saw that.

"But you see, Skyrider, he can't fly without gas, and if you just have a little bit—just enough to practise with——"

"Mary V, when you aren't on the fight you're the best little pal in the world!" cried Johnny impulsively, and leaned and caught her hand and held it tight for a minute.

CHAPTER XVI

LET'S GO

FROM a crooked willow branch thrust upright into the hard-packed sand to mark the entrance to the secret niche, a ripped flour sack hung limp in the cool, still air of a red dawn. From the niche itself came the vibrant buzzing of a high-powered motor to which Sandy listened with head up and ears perked anxiously, his staring eyes rolling toward a feasible line of retreat should panic overwhelm his present astonished disapproval.

The buzzing drew steadily nearer the yawning mouth of the cleft. The air swirled with a fine, rushing cloud of sand, against which Johnny blinked and pressed tight his lips while he dug his toes deep to guide and help propel the aeroplane through the opening. Followed Mary V, walking on her toes with excitement, swallowing dust without a murmur, her camera ready for action when they emerged into a better light. In the pilot's seat Bland Halliday, goggled and capped for flying, tested the controls before he eased the motor into its work.

Johnny, with his head bent low against the backwash of dust, looked at Mary V. Words were useless, worse than inadequate.

Well out from the mouth of the cleft, on the barren strip before the sage growth began, Bland swung the

plane so that it pointed to the west. He lifted a hand in signal, and Johnny leaned backward, digging in his heels instead of his toes. The huge man-made dragon-fly stopped, buzzing vibrantly. Bland Halliday beckoned imperiously, and Johnny went up to where he could hear.

" I'm going to try her out on a straightaway first, before I take you in," Bland leaned to shout. " Tell the girl she can be ready to snap me when I come back. I've got to test out the controls, and I want you ready to grab 'er if she don't stop right along here somewhere. All right—outa the way ! "

Johnny ran back, away from the wing, and stood beside Mary V. He saw Bland turn his head and glance out along the right wing, then to the left. He caught a sense of Bland's tightening nerves, a mental and muscular poising for the flight. The thrumming jumped to a throbbing roar. The plane ran forward like a plover, gathering speed as it went. Fifty yards —a hundred—the little wheels left the sand, the tail sagged, the nose pointed slightly upward. The throb accelerated as distance dimmed the roar, until once more the droning thrum dominated.

" Oh-h-h ! " gasped Mary V, and caught Johnny's arm and gripped it.

Johnny did not hear, did not feel her fingers pressing hard upon his biceps. Johnny stood like a man hypnotized ; wide-eyed, the white line around his mouth, all his young soul straining after the aeroplane that went sailing away like a hawk balancing on outstretched wings.

" Oh-h-h-h ! " gasped Mary V again, and squeezed his arm without knowing that she did so. " O-h—he's coming back ! See—see how he circles—oh-h —he's doing an S, Johnny ! Oh, Johnny, you lucky, lucky boy ! Oh, and it's yours ! Johnny Jewel,

you've simply *got* to let me fly! Oh-h, I'm going to learn too! Oh-h—Skyrider! You wooden image, you, why don't you *say* something?"

Johnny looked at her, and there were tears pushing up to the edge of his eyelids. He looked away quickly and blinked them back.

Mary V bit her lip, abashed at the revelation of what this meant to Johnny. And then the drone was a roar again, and the aeroplane was skimming down to them. A *pop-pop-pop—pop*, and the motor stilled suddenly. The little wheels touched the ground, spurned it, touched again and came spinning toward them, reminding Johnny again of a lighting plover. The propeller revolved slower and slower, stopped at a rakish angle. Mary V felt the trembling of Johnny's arm as he pulled loose from her and went up to steady the machine to its final stand.

Bland Halliday pushed up his goggles. "She's runnin' like a new watch," he announced. "Juh get a picture?" This last to Mary V.

She shook her head, refusing to explain the omission. Bland turned to Johnny.

"She's O.K., old man. All we gotta do now is load up and start. You sure have balled things up by not getting enough gas, though. How far is it to that tank station—or some other that's closer?"

"There isn't any closer. I don't know exactly, but——"

"It's fifty-seven miles," Mary V fibbed hastily, and reached back a foot to kick Johnny into silence.

"Not air-line?"

"Certainly, air-line. Do you realize that you rode *seventy-five* miles, the way you came? And it's pretty rough country to land on, if you ran out of gas." She gave Johnny another kick, which Bland

could not observe because of the wing they were leaning against.

Bland's mouth pulled down at the corners. "I *told* yuh we needed more gas," he complained. "Where'd you git the idea of packing gas in a tin cup to run an aeroplane on?"

"Where'd you get the idea we could pack a fifty-gallon drum on horseback?" Johnny retorted. "Believe me, you're lucky to get any at all!"

"I'll say this is some country!" Bland observed sourly. "Here we are—all ready to go—and not enough gas to take us to the railroad, even! Well, get in. I'll joy-ride yuh up and down this damn' scenery till the gas gives out."

"You'll teach me to fly There's enough gas for one good lesson, anyway."

"Oh, all right. Sure, I'll teach you, if you're able to learn. But you hustle more gas down here, see? I'm all fed up on this country, and I ain't denying it. First off, we'll do a straightaway. I spotted a good level strip of ground over thereaways that'll do to teach you how to land. Then we'll come back and fly straight off east for aways, and circle and come back. How does that suit?"

"Fine and dandy. Hold my hat, Mary V." Johnny went to the front, reached high and caught the propeller blade. "All ready?" he cried, with the air of a veteran.

"A'right!" answered Bland, and Johnny put his weight into the pull, failed to "turn 'er over," took a deep breath and tried it again. The third attempt set the propeller whirling in a blurred circle. The motor woke to throbbing life again.

"Help me turn 'er first," called Bland, with a gesture to make his meaning clear.

"'Bye, Mary V! Now's your chance to get a picture—but you'll have to hurry!"

Johnny climbed up, straddled into the seat ahead of Bland. He placed his feet, pulled down his goggles, grasped the wheel and felt himself balanced —poised, with a drumming beat in his throat, a suffocating fullness in his chest. His moment had come, he thought swiftly, as one thinks when facing a sudden, whelming event. The biggest moment in his life—the moment that he had dreamed of—the culmination of all his hopes while he studied and worked—the moment when he took flight in an aeroplane of his own!

"Easy on the controls, bo, till you get the feel of it." Bland leaned to shout in his ear. "You can over-control, if yuh don't watch out. You feel my control. Don't try to do anything yourself at first. You'll come into it gradual."

He sat back, and Johnny waited, breathing unevenly. He had meant to wave a hand nonchalantly to Mary V, but when the time came he forgot.

The motor drummed to a steady roar. The plane started, ran along the sand for a shorter distance than before, smoothed suddenly as it left the ground, climbed insidiously. The beat in Johnny's throat lessened. He forgot the suffocated feeling in his chest. He glanced to the right and looked down on the ridge that held the hangar in its rocky face. A perfect assurance, a tranquil exaltation possessed him. God-like, he was riding the air—and it was as though he had done it always.

He frowned. The earth, that had flattened to a grey smoothness, roughened again, neared him swiftly. Ahead was a bare, yellow patch—they were pointed toward it at a slackened speed. They were just over it—the wheels touched, ran for ten

feet or so, bounced away and returned again. They were circling slowly, just skimming the surface of the ground. They slowed and stopped, the plane quivering like a scared horse.

"Fine!" Bland shouted above the eased thrum of the motor. "You done fine, but seems like you showed a tendency to freeze onto the wheel when we were coming down; yuh don't wanta do that, bo. Keep your control easy—flexible, like. Now we'll go back where the girl is and make a landing there. And then we'll make a flight—as far as is safe on our teacup of gas!"

"I brought five gallons; that ought to run us a ways," Johnny pointed out. "I didn't want to land, that is why I froze to the wheel, as you call it. I wanted to keep a-goin'!"

"You get me the gas, and we'll keep a-goin', all right, all right! I got a hunch, bo, you're holding out on me."

"Forget it! Let's go!"

Again the short run, the smooth, upward flight, the slower descent, the bouncing along to a stop.

"You done better, bo. I guess this ain't the first time you ever flew, if you told it all. I hardly touched the controls; Now, say! On the square—where's that gas at? She's working perfect, and now's the time we oughta beat it outa here, before something goes wrong. I *know* you've got more gas than what you claim you've got."

"You know a lot you just think. I'll send for some, right off. Let's go. No use burning gas standing still!"

Mary V, her camera sagging in her two hands so that the lens looked at the wheels, gazed wistfully after them as they rose and went humming away toward the rising sun, that had just cleared the

jagged rim of mountains and was gilding the ledge behind her. They climbed and swerved a little to the south, evidently to avoid looking straight into the sun.

Sandy stamped and snorted, tugging at the rope that tied him. Mary V looked down, away from the diminishing aeroplane, and gave a shrill cry of dismay.

"Jake! You come back here—*Whoa!*"

She stood with her mouth partly open, staring down along the ledge to where Jake, whom she had daringly borrowed again because of his strength and his speed that could bring her to Sinkhole in time to watch the trial flight, was clattering away with broken bridle reins snapping. Sandy wanted to follow. When she ran toward him to catch him before he broke loose, he, too, snapped a rein and went racing away after Jake.

Mary V stamped her foot, and cried a little, and blamed Bland Halliday for flying down that way where Jake could see him and get scared. She had been very careful to tie Jake back out of sight of the strip of sand where Johnny had told her they would make their start and their landing. It wasn't her fault that she was set afoot—but Bland Halliday just *knew* Jake would be scared stiff if he went down past where he was, and he had done it deliberately. And now Sandy was gone, too—and Johnny only had a couple of bronks in the little pasture—and she would just like to know what she was going to *do*? She should think that the least Johnny and Bland could do would be to come back and—do *something* about the horses. They surely must have seen Jake running away, and Johnny would have sense enough to know what that meant.

But Johnny, as it happened, was wholly absorbed in other things. He was not thinking of horses, nor

of Mary V, nor of anything except flying. He was crowding into a few precious minutes all the pent emotions of his dearest dreams. He was getting the "feel" of the controls, putting his theoretical learning to the test, finding just how much and how little it took to guide, to climb, to dip. Bland Halliday was a good flyer, and he was doing his best, showing off his skill before Johnny.

He shut off the motor for a minute and volplaned. "Great way to see the country!" he shouted, and climbed back in an easy spiral.

Johnny looked down. They were still within the lines of the Rolling R range, he could tell by a certain red hill that, from that height, looked small and insignificant, but red still and perfect in its contour. Beyond he could see the small thread stretched across a half-barren slope—the fence he meant to inspect that day. Between the red hill and the fence were four moving dots, following behind several other smaller dots, which his range-trained eyes recognized as horses driven by men on horseback.

The aeroplane circled hawklike, climbed higher, and disported itself in an S or two and a "figure eight," all of which Johnny absorbed as a sponge absorbs water. Then, pointing, flew straight.

They were going back to the ledge. Johnny's heart sank at thought of once more creeping along on the surface of the earth like a worm, toiling over the humps and the hollows that looked so tiny from away up there. He wanted to implore Bland to turn and go back, but he did not know how long the gasolene would last, and he was afraid they might be compelled to land in some spot a long way from his rock hangar. He said nothing, therefore, but strove to squeeze what bliss remained for him in the next minutes, distressingly few though they were.

As it happened, Bland did not know the topography of Sinkhole as did Johnny, and in the still air the flour sack did not flutter. Bland was in a fair way to fly too far. Johnny knew they were much too high to land at the cleft unless they did an abrupt dive, and he did not quite like the prospect. He let Bland go on, then daringly banked and circled. Bland had done it, half a dozen times—so why not Johnny? Luck was with him—or perhaps his sense of balance was true. He did not side-slip, and he made the turn on a downward incline, which brought them closer to earth. He sought out the place where Mary V, a tiny wisp of a figure, stood beside the cleft, and flattened out as the ground came rushing up to meet him.

To all intents Johnny made that landing alone, for if Bland helped he did not say so. Johnny was positive that he had made it himself, and his sense of certainty propelled him whooping to where Mary V stood, her camera once more slanted uselessly in her two hands, her lips set in a line that usually meant trouble for somebody.

"How's that—hunh? Say, there's nothing like it! Did you get a picture of that landing I made? Say——"

"It seems to me that you are doing all the saying yourself," Mary V interrupted him unenthusiastically. "It may be all very nice for you, Johnny Jewel, to go sailing around in an aeroplane. I suppose it *is* very nice for you. I grant that without argument. But as for me——" Sympathy for herself pushed her lips into a trembling, forced a quiver into her voice.

"As for *me*, you went and stampeded Jake so he broke loose and went off like a—a bullet! And Bill Hayden will just about *murder* me for taking him; I

was going to sneak him back while the boys were out after more horses, and sneak out again with Tango so Bill wouldn't know. And now *look* what a mess you've got me into! Of course *you* don't care—you and your darned old flying machine? I wish it had busted itself all to pieces! And you too! And Sandy's stampeded after Jake, and I'm just glad of it!" She gulped, forced back further angry-little-girl storming, and recovered her young-lady sarcasm.

"But please don't let me interrupt your very fascinating new pastime. Of course, since you are a young man of leisure, playing with your new toy must seem far more important than the fact that I have about twenty miles to walk—through the sand and the heat, and not even a canteen of water to save me from parching with thirst. I—I must ask you to pardon me for—for thrusting my merely personal affairs upon your notice. Well, what are you grinning about? Do you think it's *funny*?"

CHAPTER XVII

A RIDER OF THE SKY

"I COULD take her home, old top—if I had the gas." Bland turned his pale stare significantly from Mary V to Johnny. "Come through, bo. You know you've got more gas hid out on me somewhere. I got a slant at the bill of it, so I *know*. It wouldn't be polite to let the young lady walk home."

Johnny stilled him to silence with a round-eyed stare.

"Thank you, I'd much prefer to walk—if it was forty miles instead of twenty!" Mary V chilled him further. "What are we going to do, Johnny? I don't know *what* will happen if Bill Hayden finds out that I borrowed Jake. And then letting him get away, like that——"

"Sandy's at the pasture fence, I'd be willing to bet; but at that it's going to be the devil's own job to catch him, me afoot. And he wouldn't let you on him if I did. I guess it's a case of ride the sky or walk, Mary V."

"Then we better be stepping, bo, before the wind comes up, as I've noticed it's liable to, late in the forenoon. You dig up the gas, and I'll take her home."

"Thank you, I do not wish to trouble you, Mr.

Halliday. Johnny can take me, if anybody——"

"Who—him?" Bland Halliday's smile was twisted far to the left. "Say, where do you get that idea—him flyin' after one lesson? Gee, you must think flyin' is like driving a Ford!"

"You could go to the shack and 'phone home for some one to come after you," Johnny suggested uncertainly.

"And let them know where I am? You must be absolutely crazy, if you think I'd consider such a thing. I'm supposed to be getting 'Desert Glimpses'——"

"Well, you sure got your glimpse," tittered Bland.

Mary V turned her back on him, took Johnny by the arm, and walked him away for private conference.

"You better let him take you home, Mary V. He's all right—for flying. I've got to hand it to him there."

"And give him a chance to steal your aeroplane? He'd never bring it back. I know he wouldn't."

"He'd have to. I'd only give him gas enough to make the trip on, and——"

"And if he had enough to come back with, he'd have enough to get to the railroad with. Don't be stupid. You can take me; couldn't you, now, honest?"

"Well—I feel as if I could, all right. But a fellow's supposed to practise a lot with an instructor before he gets gay and goes to flying alone. Bland says——"

"Oh, plague take Bland! What would you have done if you hadn't run across him at all? Would you have tried to fly?"

"You know it!" Johnny laughed. "I've sat in that seat and worked the controls every day since I got it. I know 'em by heart. I've studied the

theory of flying till I'll bet I could stick Bland himself on some of the principles. And I've been flying in my sleep for months and months. Sure, I'd have tackled it. But I wouldn't have had you along when I started in."

"You know how the thing works, then. Well, come on back and work it! Unless you're scared."

"Me scared? Of an aeroplane? It's you I'm thinking about. I'd go alone, quick enough. Maybe we could both crowd into the front seat, and let Bland pilot the machine. Then——"

"I abso-*lutely* will not—fly with—Bland Halliday! If you won't take me home, I'll walk!" Mary V pinched in her lips, which meant stubbornness.

Johnny heaved a sigh. "Oh, shoot! I'm game to tackle it if you are. Far as I'm personally concerned, *I know I can fly*." His lips, too, set themselves in the line of stubbornness. And he added with perfect seriousness, "It ain't half as hard as topping a bronk."

He glanced back, saw that Bland had gone into the cleft, and hurried on to where he had buried the gasolene in the sand behind a jagged splinter of rock in a shallow niche.

"Well, the Jane changed her mind, did she?" Bland commented when Johnny arrived at the plane with the gas. "Thought she would. Walking twenty miles ain't no sunshine, if you ask me. Better have the tank full-up, bo. It's always safer.

A suppressed jubilance such as had seized and held him when he first beheld the disabled aeroplane in the desert valley, filled Johnny now. As he climbed up and filled the tank his lips were pursed into a soundless whistle, his eyes were wide and shining, his whole tanned face glowed. Bland Halliday regarded him

curiously, his opaque blue eyes shifting inquiringly to Mary V, halted at a sufficient distance to take a picture. They were very young, these two—wholly inexperienced in the byways of life, confident, with the supreme assurance of ignorance. It had been a queer idea, hiding the gasolene ; and threatened to be awkward, since Bland was practically helpless out here in the sand and rocks. But things always turned out the right way, give them time enough. The kid was filling the tank—at present Bland asked no more of the gods than that. His sour lips drew up at the corners, as they had done when Johnny had made him the proposition in Agua Dulce. Mary V closed her camera and came toward them, walking springily through the sand, looking more than ever like a slim boy in her riding breeches and boots.

" All right. You lend Miss Selmer your goggles and cap, Bland. You won't need 'em yourself till I get back."

" Till you—what ? "

" Till I get back. I aim to take Miss Selmer home." Johnny's lips were still puckered ; his face still held the glow of elation. But his eyes looked down sidelong, searching Bland's face for his inmost thought.

Bland was staring, loose-lipped, incredulous. " Aw, say ! D'yuh think I'll swallow that ? " There was a threatening note beneath the whine of his voice.

" If you don't choke. Come on, Mary V ; ' hop in, and we'll take a spin,' and all the rest of it. Venus'll have nothing on you. Here's my goggles ; put 'em on. I'm going to borrow Bland's." It had occurred to Johnny that Mary V would probably shrink from wearing anything belonging to Bland Halliday ; girls were queer that way.

Bland stepped pugnaciously forward ; his pale eyes were unpleasantly filmed with anger. " Aw, I see your game, bo ; but you can't get away with it. Not for a minute, you can't. You think I'm such a mark as that ? Come down here and work like a dog to get the plane ready to fly and then kiss yuh good-bye and watch yuh go off with it—and leave me here to rot with the snakes and lizards ? Oh, no ! I'll take the young lady——"

" Give me a hand up, Johnny. The front seat ? How perfectly *ducky* to ride home in an aeroplane ! Oh, Johnny wants your goggles, Mr. Halliday." Mary V reached down quickly and lifted them off the irate aviator's head before he knew what she was after. " Here they are, Johnny. Sit down, and Mr. Halliday will crank up—or whatever you call it. I'll send him right back, Mr. Halliday, just as quick as ever he can make the trip ! "

Mr. Halliday gave her a venomous glance, and a sneer which included them both.

" Ain't it a shame she ain't equipped with a self-starter ? " he sneered. " You two look cute, settin' there ; but I don't seem to see yuh making any quick getaway, at that." He spread his legs and stood arrogantly, arms folded, the sneer looking perfectly at home on his face.

" Don't be a darned boob ! " Johnny snapped impatiently. " Turn 'er over. Miss Selmer wants me to pilot her home, and I'm going to tackle it. You needn't be scared, though ; I'll come back."

" I don't think so," said Bland, swaying a little as he stood.

" I will, unless I bust something. And it's my machine, so I'm sure going to be right careful that nothing busts." What Johnny wanted to do was get out and lick Bland Halliday till he howled, but

since the gratification of that desire was neither politic nor convenient, he promised himself a settlement later on, when Mary V was not present. Just now he must humour Bland along.

"I don't think you'll come back," Bland repeated, "because I don't think you'll start. There's a little detail to be looked after first—a little swingin' on the propeller to be done. I don't see anybody 'doin' it. And I never did hear of anybody flying without their motor running." He tittered malevolently.

"Cut out the comedy, bo, and let me in there. You start 'er for me, and *I'll* take Miss Selmer home for you. You ain't got your pilot's licence yet—by a long ways. I never heard of a flyer getting his licence on a thirty or forty minute course. It ain't done, bo—take it from me." He spat into the sand with an air of patient tolerance.

"Are you all ready, Johnny?" Mary V's voice was rather alarmingly sweet. "I'm not going to *touch* this ducky little wheel. I'm afraid I might think it was my car and do something queer. I shall let you drive—if you *call* it driving. Now if Mr. Halliday will crank up for us, we'll go."

"Mr. Halliday will let you set there till you get enough," Bland grinned sourly. "I'm thinking of your safety, sister. I'm thinkin' more of you than that piece of cheese in the pilot's seat."

"Mr. Halliday, won't you *please* start the motor?" There was a remarkable stress upon the "please," considering the gun in Mary V's steady little right hand. She peered down owl-eyed at Bland through the big goggles. "This is Arizona—where guns are not loaded with blanks, Mr. Halliday. I'll prove it if you like. I'd just *love* to shoot you!"

Bland Halliday drew his feet together as though he intended to run. Mary V, still peering down

through the goggles, shot a spurt of sand over the toe of one scuffed shoe. Bland stepped aside hastily.

"I can't see well enough to be sure of missing you next time," Mary V assured him. "Generally I can shoot awfully close and miss, but—I'd *like* to shoot you, really. You'd better crank the motor."

Bland saw the hammer lift again, ominously deliberate. He sidled hurriedly down to the propeller. His pale stare never left the gun, which kept him inexorably before its muzzle.

Johnny's eyes looked as big as his goggles, but he did not say a word. And presently, after three rather hysterical attempts, Bland set the propeller whirring, and ran out to one side, his hands up as though he feared for his life if he lowered them. The motor's hum increased to the steady roar which Johnny's ear recognized as the sound Bland got from it when he started. And with an erratic wabbling the plane moved forward jerkily, steadied a bit as Johnny set his teeth and all his stubbornness to the work, and gradually—very gradually—lifted and went whirring away through the sunlight.

They say that Providence protects children and fools. Johnny Jewel, I think, could justly claim protection on both grounds. He was certainly attempting a foolhardy feat, and he was doing it with a childlike confidence in himself. As for Mary V—oh, well, Mary V was very young and a woman, and therefore not to be held accountable for her rash faith that the man would take care of her. Mary V had centuries of dependent womanhood behind her, and must be excused.

Johnny wished that he had warned her about the peculiar tendency of the air currents to follow the contour of the ground. He climbed as high as Bland

had climbed at first, hoping to escape the abruptness of the waves such as he had studied patiently from charts, and which he had felt when they flew over arroyos and rough ground. He did not want Mary V to be alarmed, but the noise of the motor made speech impossible, so he let the explanation go for the present. Mary V was sitting exactly in the centre, grasping rather tightly the edges of the pit, as a timid person holds fast to the sides of a canoe. Sitting so, she did not look in the least like a young woman who had just compelled a man at the point of a revolver to do her bidding. More like a child who is having its first boat ride, and who is holding its breath, mentally balanced between howls of fear and shrieks of glee. But Johnny did not believe she was scared.

Johnny was keyed up to the point of working miracles, of accomplishing the impossible. Johnny was happy, a little awed at his own temerity, wholly absorbed in his determination to handle that aeroplane just as well as Bland or any other living man could handle it. He kept reminding himself that it was simple enough, if you only had the nerve to go ahead and *do* it; if you just forgot that there was such a thing as falling; and, of course, if you knew what it was you ought to do, and how you ought to do it. Johnny knew—theoretically. And it did not seem possible to him that he could fall. He was master of a machine that was master of the air. He was riding the sky—and Mary V was there, riding with him, absolutely confident that he would not let her be hurt.

He did not attempt any "fancy stunts," such as Bland had done. He merely climbed to where he dared circle, then circled deliberately, carefully. When he came about so that the sun was warming

his right shoulder, he flew straight for the Rolling R ranch, like a homing pigeon at sunset.

It was exhilarating—it was wonderful! Johnny, knowing the country so well, avoided passing over the roughest places, keeping well out from the hills, and into the smoother flow over the broad levels. The drone of the motor was a triumphal song. The flattening wind against his cheeks was sweeter than kisses. Supreme confidence in himself and in the machine stimulated him, made him ready to dare anything, do anything. Once more he was a god, skimming god-like through space, gazing down on the little world and the little, crawling things of the world with pity.

Ahead of him, Mary V never moved. Her little fingers never loosened their grip of the padded leather. Wisps of her brown hair, caught in the terrific air-pressure, stood back from her head like small pennants.

Black Ridge they passed, and it looked squatty and insignificant. Johnny swerved a little to the westward, to avoid a series of washes and deep gullies and small ridges between that might affect the smooth flight of the plane. On and on and on, boring steadily through the air that rushed to meet them—or so it seemed.

Far ahead, lumped on a brushless level which Johnny knew of old, a little, milling cluster of ant-like creatures attracted Johnny's eye.

He watched it a minute, knew it for a horse round-up, and chuckled to himself. The Rolling R boys—and revenge for the sneers and the fleers they had given him when he had only dared to *dream* of flying. He wanted to tell Mary V, but then he thought that Mary V's eyes were as sharp as his. Yes, her fingers reluctantly loosened their hold and she tried to point

—and had her hand swept backward by the wind. She tried again, and Johnny nodded, though Mary V could not see him without turning her head, which she seemed to think she must not do.

The Rolling R boys—Tex and Bill Hayden and Curley and Aleck and one or two more whom this story has not met—were driving a small herd of horses from which they meant to cut out a few chosen ones for breaking. Away up toward where the sun would be at two o'clock, a little droning dragon-fly thing coming swiftly, and a little imp of mischief whispering into the willing ear of one who felt that he had suffered much and patiently. Mary V, hanging on tight, with her lips pressed together and her eyes big and bright behind her goggles, watched how swiftly the ant-like creatures grew larger and took the form of horses and men.

Johnny dared a volplane, slanting steeply down at the herd. He wanted to get close enough so that they could see who he was, and he wanted to fill his lungs and then shout down to them something that would make them squirm. He meant to flatten out a hundred feet or so above them and shout, "*For I'm a rider of the sky!*" and then give a range yell and climb up away from them with arrogant indifference to their stunned amazement.

Well, Johnny did it. That is, he volplaned, banked as much as he thought wise, and flattened out and yelled, "*I'm a rider of the sky!*" just as he had planned.

It happened that no one heard him, though Johnny did not know that. Horses and men tilted heads comically and stared up at the great, swooping thing that came buzzing like a monstrous bumble-bee that has learned to stutter. Then the horses squatted cowering away from it, and scattered like drops

of water when a stone is thrown into a pond.

Johnny did not see any more of it, for Johnny was busy. Which was a pity, for the horse of Tex bolted a hundred yards and began to pitch so terrifically that Tex was catapulted from the saddle and had to walk home with a sprained ankle. Little Curley's horse took to the hills, and little Curley did not return in time for his dinner. Aleck and Bill Hayden went careering away toward the north, and one of the two strangers went so far west that he got lost. Since that day no horse that was present can see a hawk fly overhead without suffering convulsions of terror.

Johnny flew to a certain grassy spot he knew, not half a mile from the house, and landed. I cannot say that he landed smoothly or expertly, but he landed with no worse mishap than a bent axle on the landing gear, and a squeal from Mary V, who thought they were going to keep on bouncing until they landed in a gully farther on. Johnny climbed down and turned the plane around by hand, and Mary V helped him. Then she took a picture of him and the plane, and climbed back and let Johnny take a picture of her in the plane. It was rather tame, for by all the laws of logic they should have broken their necks.

Before he started back, Johnny leaned over and shouted to Mary V: "You can tell the boys they can sing that Skyrider thing all they want to, now."

"They won't want to—now," Mary V yelled back.

CHAPTER XVIII

FLYING COMES HIGH

JOHNNY JEWEL reined his horse on a low ridge and stared dully down into the little valley where a scattered herd of horses fed restlessly, their uneven progress toward Sinkhole Creek vaguely indicated by the general direction of their grazing. The pendulum of his spirits had swung farther and farther away from his ecstasy of the morning, until now he had plumbed the deepest well of gloom. That he had flown to the Rolling R ranch and back without wrecking his aeroplane or killing himself did not cheer him. He was in the mood to wish that he had broken his neck instead of coming safely to earth.

Johnny was like a sleeper who has dreamed pleasantly and has awakened to find the house falling on him—or something like that. He had dreamed great things, he had lulled his conscience with promises and reassurances that all was well, and that he was not shirking any really important duty. And now he was awake, and the reality was of the full flavour of bitter herbs long steeped.

The forenoon had been full of achievement. Johnny had, for safety's sake, removed the propeller from his aeroplane and carried it home with him, in the face of Bland Halliday's bitter whining and vituperation, which reminded Johnny of a snake

that coils and hisses and yet does not strike. It had been an awkward job, because he had been compelled to thrash Bland first, and then tie his hands behind him to prevent some treacherous blow from behind while he worked. Johnny had hated to do that, but he felt obliged to do it, because Bland had found the buried gasolene and had taken away the full cans and hidden them, replacing them with the empty cans. If Bland had not shown a town man's ignorance of the tale a man's tracks will tell, Johnny would never have suspected anything.

Bland had also threatened to wreck the plane for revenge, but Johnny did not worry about that. He had retaliated with a threat to starve Bland until he repaired whatever damage he wrought—and Bland had seen the point, and had subsided into his self-pitying whine.

Johnny felt perfectly easy in his mind so far as the aeroplane was concerned. He had explained to Bland that he meant to keep his promise as soon as he could and be square with his boss, and Bland had at the last resigned himself to the delay—no doubt comforting himself with some cunning plan of revenge later, when he had gotten Johnny into the city, where Bland felt more at home and where Johnny would have all the odds against him, being a stranger and—in Bland's opinion—a "hick."

The forenoon, therefore, had been all triumph for Johnny. All triumph and all glowing with the rose tints of promise. The afternoon was a different matter.

Johnny had ridden out on the recaptured Sandy. When he had time to think of it, that glimpse of the horsemen and the loose horses over beyond the red hill nagged him with a warning that all was not well on the Rolling R range. He had headed straight

for the red hill, and he had noticed many little betraying signs that had long escaped him in his preoccupation with his own dreams and ambitions

The horses were wild, and ducked into whatever cover was nearest when he approached. Johnny knew that they had lately been chased and frightened, and that there was only one logical reason for that, because none of the Rolling R boys had been down on the Sinkhole range since the colts were branded and these horses driven down for the summer grazing.

Johnny rode to where he had seen the horseman, picked up the tracks of shod hoofs and followed them to the fence. Saw where two panels of wire had been loosened and afterwards refastened. Some one had dropped a couple of new staples beside one post, and there were fresh hammer dents in the wood. Johnny had not done it ; there was only one other answer to the question of the fence-mender's reason. There was no mystery whatever. Johnny looked, and he knew.

He looked out across the fence and knew, too, how helpless he was. He had not even brought his rifle, as Sudden had told him to do. The rifle had been a nuisance, and Johnny conveniently forgot it once or twice, and then had told himself that it was just a notion of old Sudden's—and what was the use of packing something you never would need ? He had not carried it with him for more than three weeks. But if he had it now, he knew that it would not help him any. The thieves had hours the start of him. It had been just after sunrise that he had seen them —he, a Rolling R man, sailing foolishly around in an aeroplane and actually *seeing* a bunch of Rolling R horses being stolen, without caring enough to think

what the fellows were up to! Self-disgust seized him nauseatingly. It was there at the fence he first wished he had fallen and broken his neck.

He turned back, rode until he had located a bunch of horses, made a rough count, and went on, heavy-hearted, steeped in self-condemnation. He located other horses, scattered here and there in little groups, and kept a mental tally of their numbers. Now, while the sun dipped low toward the western hills, he watched this last herd dismally, knowing how completely he had failed in his trust.

Square with his boss! He, Johnny Jewel, had presumed to prate of it that day, with half the horses stolen from Sinkhole. For so did conscience magnify the catastrophe. He had dared to assume that his presence there at Sinkhole was necessary to the welfare of the Rolling R! Johnny laughed, but tears would have been less bitter than his laughter.

He had been proud of himself, arrogantly sure of his ability, his nerve, his general superiority. He, who had skirked his duty, the work that won him his food and clothes and money to spend, he had blandly considered himself master of himself, master of his destiny! He had fatuously believed that, had belittled his work and thought it unworthy his time and thought and ability—and he had let himself be hoodwinked and robbed in broad daylight!

He remembered the days when he had compromised with his work, had ridden to a certain pinnacle that commanded a wide view of the range, and had looked out over the country from the top—and had hurried back to the niche to work on the aeroplane, calling his duty to the Rolling R done for that day. He might better have stolen those horses himself, Johnny thought. He would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that he had accomplished what

he had set out to do ; he would not have to bear this sickening feeling of failure along with his guilt.

But staring at the horses the thieves had left would not bring back the ones they had stolen, so Johnny rode back to camp, caught the gentlest of his two bronks and turned Sandy loose in the pasture. He had formed the habit of riding over to the aeroplane before he cooked his supper ; sometimes eating with Bland so that he might the longer gaze upon his treasure. But to-night he neither rode to the niche nor cooked supper. He did not want to eat, and he did not want to see his aeroplane, that had tempted him to such criminal carelessness.

The telephone called him, and Johnny went dismally to answer. It was old Sudden, of course ; the full, smooth voice that could speak harsh commands or criticisms and make them sound like pleasantries. Johnny thought the voice was a little smoother, a little fuller than usual.

" Hello. The boys tell me that they had quite a lot of—excitement—this morning when they were rounding up a bunch of horses. An aeroplane swooped down on them with—er—somewhat unpleasant results. Yes. The horses stampeded, and —er—the boys were compelled to do some hard riding. Yes. Tex was thrown—that makes two of the boys that are laid up for repairs. They haven't succeeded in gathering the horses so far. Know anything about it, Johnny ? "

" Yes, sir." Johnny's voice was apathetic. What did a little thing like a stampede amount to, in the face of what Sudden had yet to hear ?

" Oh, you do ? " Sudden was plainly expectant. He did not, however, sound particularly reassuring. " Where did that aeroplane come from ? Do you know ? "

"Yes, sir. It's one I—salvaged from Mexico. I—was trying it out."

"Oh. You were? Trying it out on the stock. Well, I don't believe I care to work my stock with flying machines. Aviators—come high. I prefer just plain, old-fashioned riders."

He paused, quite evidently waiting to hear what Johnny had to say. But Johnny did not seem to have anything at all to say, so Sudden spoke again.

"How about the horses down at Sinkhole? Are they broken to aeroplane herding, or have they all stampeded like these up here?"

Here was escape, reprieve, an excuse that might save him. Johnny hesitated just long enough to draw his breath deeply, as a man does before diving into cold water.

"They haven't stampeded. I never had the plane in the air till this morning, and then I flew—toward the ranch. These horses down here have been stolen. About half of them, I should say. I was gone for nearly three days, getting that aeroplane from across the line. A greaser told me about it, and took me where it was. And when I got back I didn't ride the range the way I should have done—the way I did do, at first. I was working on the aeroplane, all the time I possibly could. I ran across a fellow that's been an aviator, and brought him down here, and he helped, And so the horses were stolen—a few at a time, I think. I believe I'd have missed them if they had gone all at once."

Johnny could feel the silence at the other end of the line. It lasted so long that he wondered dully if Sudden were waiting for more, but Johnny felt as though there was nothing more to add. Of what use would it be to protest that he was sorry? Bad

enough to rob a man, without insulting him with puerile regrets.

"Now—let's get this thing straight." Sudden's voice when it came was fuller than ever, smoother than ever. It was a bad sign. "You say—about half of the horses on that range have been stolen? Have you counted them?"

"No. I'm just guessing. I don't think I've lost more than half. I just made a rough tally of what I found to-day."

"You say not *more* than half, then. But you're guessing. Now, when did you first miss them?"

"To-day. I was all taken up with that damned aeroplane before, and I didn't pay much attention. This morning the fellow here took me for a flight, and we went east. Beyond the red hill I happened to see four riders driving a few horses. They were inside our fence. I didn't think what it meant then, because Bland was climbing in a spiral and my mind was on that. But I rode over there this afternoon, and I saw where they'd let down the fence and then put it back up again. And they'd tried to cover up the tracks of horses going through. So I rode all afternoon, making a sort of tally of what horses ranged over that way. A lot of 'em's gone. I missed some of the best ones—some big geldings that I think I'd know anywhere."

"You say they went through the fence on the east line?"

"Yes, sir. It was just after sunrise that I saw them."

"And it was afternoon, you say, before it occurred to you that they might possibly have been stealing my horses. In the meantime, you were up this way, playing hell with the round-up."

"Yes, sir, that's about the way it stacks up."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Try and get back what horses I can, I guess." Johnny did not speak as though he had much faith.

"Going to go out and round them up with your flying machine, I suppose! That sounds practical, perfectly plausible. As much so as the rest of the story."

Johnny was too utterly miserable and hopeless to squirm at the sarcasm.

"Well, we don't want to be hasty. In fact, you have not been hasty so far, from what I can gather. Except in the matter of indulging yourself in aircraft at my expense. Don't leave the cabin. I shall probably want to talk about this again to-night."

That was all. It was enough. It was like Sudden to withhold condemnation until after he had digested the crime. Johnny did not think much about what Sudden would do, but he had a settled conviction that condemnation was merely postponed for a little while. It would come. But Johnny sat already condemned by the harshest judge a man may have—the harshness of his own youthful conscience.

He sat brooding, his palms holding his jaws, his eyes staring at the floor. What was he going to do? Sudden had asked him that. Johnny had asked himself the same question; indeed, it had drummed insistently in his brain since he had inspected the fence that afternoon and had known just what had befallen him. The bell rang—Sudden was calling again. He got up stolidly to answer more questions.

"Oh—Skyrider! I can only talk a minute. Mom's in the kitchen, and dad's gone to hunt up Bill Hayden. Is it true, Johnny, that a lot of horses have been stolen?"

"Yes."

"I heard dad talking. Oh, I wish I could help hunt them, but I'm in an awful mess, Skyrider! Bill Hayden knew I'd taken Jake, because my saddle was gone, and none of the other horses were. I never *saw* anyone so mean and suspicious! And he knows Jake got away from me, too, because I was trying to catch him when Bill rode up, just perfectly furious over the horses stampeding. And Bill told dad—he certainly is the *meanest* thing! And now dad won't let me go out of the sight of the house unless he or mom are with me. And mommie never goes anywhere, it's so hot. And dad only goes to town. But they don't know it was us in the aeroplane—and I'm just glad of it if we did scatter their old herd for them. Everybody's so mean to me! And I was planning how you'd teach me to fly, and we'd have the duckiest times—and now——"

She hung up so abruptly that Johnny knew, as well as though he had been in the room with her, what had happened. She had heard her dad coming. Before Johnny had sat down again to his brooding, Sudden called him.

"You spoke about a greaser telling you about an aeroplane, and that you went with him and got it." Sudden's voice was cool and even—an inexorable voice. "Do you remember my telling you not to let a greaser on the Rolling R range if you could help it?"

"Yes, sir. This one's brother came first. He was just a kid, and he wanted—a drink." It struck Johnny quite suddenly that Tomaso's reason for coming had been a very poor one indeed. For there was water much nearer Tucker Bly's range, which was to the east of Sinkhole. And Tomaso should have had no occasion whatever to be riding to Sinkhole.

"Oh. He wanted a drink, did he? Where did he come from?"

"He works for Tucker Bly. So he said. And he told me about the aeroplane that had been lost, across the line. His brother had found it."

"And you went to see his brother?"

"His brother came to see me. The kid told him I was—interested."

"You went after the flying machine when? Over two weeks ago, eh? And you were gone—I see. Approximately two days and two nights—nearer three days. Who answered the telephone while you were gone? It happens that I have not missed calling you every night; did the man have a cold?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't know anybody——" Johnny frowned. It would be just as well, he felt, to keep Mary V out of it.

"You didn't know the 'phone was answered in your absence. Well, it was. By a man with a bad cold, who represented himself to be you. Did you notice any signs of anyone being there while you were gone?"

"N-no, I can't say I did. Well, the string was tied different on the door, but I didn't think much about that."

"No—you wouldn't think much about that." Sudden's tone made a mental lash of the words. "You had your own affairs to think about. You were merely being—*paid* to think of my affairs."

"Yes, sir—that's the kind of a hound I've been."

Johnny's abject tone—he who had been so high-chested in the past—may have had its effect upon the boss. When Sudden spoke again his voice was almost kind, which is unusual, surely, for a man who has been robbed.

"Well, I shall have to investigate those greasers,

I think. It looks to me as though they had used that flying machine for a bait to get you out of the way, and that looks to me too clever for greasers. It looks to me as though some one knew what bait you would jump at the quickest, young man. Do some thinking along those lines, will you? The horses are gone; but there might be some slight satisfaction in catching the thieves."

"Yes, sir. What shall I do to-morrow? Am I fired, or what?"

"You are—*what!*" Sudden was sarcastic again. "I believe, since you have been doing pretty much as you please down there, I shall expect you to go on doing as you please. I don't see how you are going to do any more damage than you have already done. On the other hand, I don't see how you are going to do much good—unless I could take those horses out of your hide!"

Johnny stared round-eyed at the 'phone, even after Sudden had hung up his receiver.

"Good golly!" he muttered, with a faint return of his normal spirit. "Old Sudden oughta been a lawyer." Then he went back to holding his jaws in two spread palms, and brooding over the trouble he was in.

CHAPTER XIX

"WE FLY SOUTH"

JOHNNY did a great deal of thinking along the line suggested by old Sudden. At first he thought merely how groundless was any suspicion that the aeroplane was in any way connected with the horse-stealing, except that it might justly be accused of contributing to his negligence. Even so, Johnny could not see how one man could possibly protect the whole of Sinkhole range from thieves. He could have been on his guard, could have noticed when the first horses were missing, and notified Sudden at once. That, of course, was what had been expected of him.

But as to Tomaso and his oily brother, Johnny did not at first see any possible connection between them and his present trouble, save that they also had innocently contributed to his neglect. But Sudden had told him to think about it, and the suggestion kept swinging his thoughts that way. Finally, for want of something better, he went back to the very beginning and reconstructed his first meeting with Tomaso. Sudden had hinted that they must have known how deeply he was interested in aviation. But Johnny did not see how that could be. He had not talked much about his ambition, even at the Rolling R, he remembered; not enough to set him

apart from the others as one who dreamed day and night of flying. Until the boys got hold of that doggerel he wrote, Johnny was sure they had not paid any attention to his occasional vague rhapsodies on the subject.

Tomaso had seen the letterhead of that correspondence school, and had just accidentally mentioned it. Or was it accidental? To make sure Johnny got out the circular which Tomaso had seen, laid it where he remembered it to have been that day, and sat down at the table where Tomaso had been sitting. He placed the lamp where the light fell full upon the paper and studied the letterhead for several minutes, scowling.

Tomaso, he decided, had remarkably sharp eyes. Seen from that angle, the letterhead was not conspicuous. The volplaning machine was not at all striking to the eye. Unless a person knew beforehand what it represented, or was looking for something of the sort, Johnny was forced to admit that he would be likely to pass it over without a second glance.

Tomaso, then, must have come there with the intention of leading adroitly to the subject of aeroplanes. He must have brought those little steel pliers purposely. And after all, he really had no business on the Rolling R range, if he was riding for the Forty-seven. He had come a good five miles inside the line. And when you looked at it that way, how had he got inside the line? There was no gate on the east side of the fence.

It looked rather far-fetched, improbable. Johnny was slow to accept the theory that he had been led to that aeroplane just as a toy is given to a child, to keep its attention engrossed with a harmless pastime while other business is afoot. It hurt his self-esteem to

believe that—wherefore he prospected his memory for some other theory to take its place.

"Well! If that's why they did it—it sure worked like a charm," he summed up his cogitations disgustedly. "I'll say I swallowed the bait whole!" And he added grimly: "I wish I knew who put them wise."

Youth began to make its demands. He started a fire, boiled coffee, fried bacon, made fresh bread, and ate a belated supper. Sudden had told him to do as he pleased. "Well," Johnny muttered, "I will take him at his word." He did not know just what he would please to do, but he realized that fasting would not help him any; nor would sleeplessness. He ate, therefore, washed his few dishes and went straight to bed. And although he lay for a long while looking at his trouble through the magnifying glass of worry, he did sleep finally—and without one definite plan for the morrow.

Half an hour before dawn, Johnny went stumbling along the ledge to the cleft. On his broad shoulder was balanced the propeller. On his face was a look of fixed determination. He scared Bland Halliday out of a sleep in which his dreams were all of a certain cabaret in Los Angeles—dreams which made Bland's waking all the more disagreeable. Johnny tilted the propeller carefully against the rock wall, lighted a match, and cupped the blaze in his palms so that the light shone on Bland.

"Where's the lantern? You better get up—it's most daylight."

"Aw, f'r cat's sake! What more new meanness you got on your mind? Me, I come down here in good faith to help fix a plane that's to take me back home—and I work like a dog——"

"Yeah—I know that song by heart, Bland. You

in your faith and your innocence, how you were basely betrayed. I can sing it backward. Lay off it now for a few minutes. I want to talk to yuh."

He lighted the lantern, and Bland lay blinking at it lugubriously. "And me—I dreamed I was in to Lemare's just after a big exhibition flight, and a bunch of movie queens was givin' me the glad eye."

"Yes, I've done some dreaming myself," Johnny interposed dryly. "I'm awake now. Listen here, Bland. I've been playing square with you, all along. I want you to get that. I can see how you being so darn crooked yourself, you may always be looking for some one to do you, so I ain't kicking at the stand you take. You've got no call, either, to kick against my opinion of you. I'm satisfied you'd steal my aeroplane and make your getaway, and lie till your tongue wore out, proving it was yours. You'd do it if you got a chance. That's why I hid the gas on you. That's why you couldn't take Miss Selmer home. I knew darn well you wouldn't come back. And that's why I took off the propeller and hid it. It ain't why I licked you yesterday—that was for what you said about Miss——"

"Aw, f'r cat's sake! Did yuh have to come and wake me up in the middle of the night just to——"

"No—oh, no. I'm merely explaining to you that I don't trust you for one holy minute. I don't want you to think you can put anything over on me by getting on my blind side. I haven't got any, so far as you're concerned. Now listen: I meant, and if possible I still mean, to keep my promise and take you to the Coast in the plane; but something's come up that is going to hold up the trip for a few days, maybe——"

"Aw, yes! I had a hunch you'd——"

"Shut up! I told you I'd go as soon as I could

without leaving the boss in the hole. Well, it happens that—well, some horses were stolen off this range, and I'm the one that's responsible. So——"

"Say, bo, you don't, f'r cat's sake, think *I* stole your damn horses? Why, honest, bo, I wouldn't have a horse on a bet! I——"

"Oh, shut *up!*" thundered the distracted Johnny above the other's whine. "Of course I know you didn't steal 'em. Horses ain't in your line, or I wouldn't be so sure. The point is this. I've got to get out and get 'em back, or get a line on who did it. I can't go off without doing something about it. This range was in my charge. I was supposed to report anything that looked suspicious, and I—well, the point is this——"

"So you said," Bland cut in, with something of his natural venom.

"Shut up. There's just a chance I can find out where those horses were taken. We'll go in the plane. You'll have to go along to handle it, because I'm liable to be busy, if I run across anybody. I'm going to pack a rifle and a six-shooter, and I don't want my hands full of controls right at the critical minute. Besides," he added ingenuously, "some of these darned air currents nearly got the best of me yesterday, coming back. You can handle the machine, and I'll do the look-see."

"Aw, sa-ay! I——"

"I know it's against my promise to a certain extent," Johnny went on. "I know I've got you in a corner, too, where you can't help yourself. You couldn't walk to the railroad, or even to the closest ranch, if you knew the way—which you don't. You'd wander around in the heat and the sand—well, you're pretty helpless without me, all right, or the plane. I sabe that better than you do. You've

got to do about as I say, because you haven't got the nerve to kill me, even if I gave you the chance. Sneaking off with the plane is about as much as you're game for.

"Well, the point is this: I don't want to take any mean advantage of you. I can't afford to pay you what your services are really worth, as pilot—and there's no reason why I should. But—well, I ain't quite broke yet. I'll give you twenty-five dollars for helping me out, in case what I want to do only takes a day or two days. If it takes more, I'll give you ten dollars a day. It isn't much, but it helps when you're broke."

Bland permitted the sour droop of his lips to ease into a grin. "Now you're coming somewhere near the point, bo," he said. "But ten dollars—say! Ten dollars ain't street-car fare. Not in little old L. A. Make it twenty, bo, and you're on."

"I'll make it nothing if ten dollars a day don't suit you!" Johnny declared hotly. "Why, damn your dirty hide, that's as much as I make in a *week*! And listen! I expect to sit in the back seat—and I'll have two guns on me."

"Aw, ferget them two guns!" Bland surrendered. "This is sure the gunniest country I ever stopped in. Even the Janes——"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, well, I'll sign up for ten, bo. It ain't eatin' money, but it'll maybe help buy me the makin's of a smoke now and then."

"Well, get up, then. I'll get us some breakfast and we'll go. It's going to be still to-day—and hot, I think. You better get up."

"Aw, that's right! You've got the upper hand, and so you can go ahead and abuse me like a dog—and I ain't got any come-back. It was Bland this

and that, when you wanted the plane repaired. Now you've got it, and it's git-ta-hell and git busy. Pull a gun on me, beat me up—accuse me of things I never done—drag me outa bed before daylight——" His self-pitying whine droned on monotonously, but he nevertheless got into his clothes and pottered around the plane by the light of the lantern and the flaring fire Johnny started.

The one praiseworthy thing he could do he did conscientiously. He inspected carefully the control wires, went over the motor and filled the radiator and the gas tank, and made sure that he had plenty of oil. His grumbling did not in the least impair his efficiency. He replaced the propeller, cursing under his breath because Johnny had taken it off. He was up in the forward seat testing the control when Johnny called him to come and eat.

In the narrow strip of sky that showed over the niche the stars were paling. A faint flush tinged the blue as Johnny looked up anxiously.

"We'll take a little grub and my two canteens full of water," he said, with a shade of uneasiness in his voice. "We don't want to get caught like those poor devils did that lost the plane. But of course——"

"Say, where you going, f'r cat's sake?" Bland looked over his cup in alarm. "Not down where them——"

"We're going to find out where those horses went. You needn't be scared, Bland. I ain't organizing any suicide club. You tend to the flying part, and I'll tend to my end of the deal. Air-line, it ain't so far. We ought to make there and back easy."

He bestirred himself, not exultantly as he had done the day before, but with a certain air of determination that impressed Bland more than his old

boyish eagerness had done. This was not to be a joy-ride. Johnny did not feel in the least god-like. Indeed, he would like to have been able to take Sandy along as a substantial substitute in case anything went wrong with the plane. He was taking a risk, and he knew it, and faced it because he had a good deal at stake. He did not consider, however, that it was necessary to tell Bland just how great a risk he was taking. He had not even considered it necessary to telephone the Rolling R and tell Sudden what it was he meant to do. Time enough afterwards—if he succeeded in doing it.

He was anxious about the gas, and about water, but he did not say anything about his anxiety. He made sure that the tank would not hold another pint of gas, and he was careful not to forget the canteens. Then, when he had taken every precaution possible for their welfare, he climbed into his place and told Bland to start the motor. He was taking precautions with Bland, also.

"We fly south," he yelled, when Bland climbed into the front seat. "Make it south-east for ten miles or so—and then swing south. I'll tap you on the shoulder when I want you to turn. Whichever shoulder I tap, turn that way. Middle of your back, go straight ahead; two taps will mean fly low; three taps, land. You got that?"

Bland, pulling down his cap and adjusting his goggles, nodded. He drew on his gloves and slid down into the seat—alert, efficient, the Bland Halliday which the general public knew and admired without a thought for his personal traits.

"About how high?" he leaned back to ask. "High enough so the hum won't be noticed on the ground? Or do you want to fly lower?"

"Top of your head means high, and on the neck,

low," Johnny promptly finished his code. Having thus made a code keyboard of Bland's person, he settled himself with his guns beside him.

Bland eased on the power, glancing unconsciously to the right and left ailerons, as he always did when he started.

The buzz of the motor grew louder and louder, the big plane quivered, started down the barren strip toward the reddening east, skimmed lighter and lighter the ground, rose straight and true, and went whirring away into the barbaric splendour of the dawn.

CHAPTER XX

MEN ARE STUPID

INTO that same dawn light filed the riders of the Rolling R, driving before them a small *remuda*. Behind them clucked the loaded chuck wagon, the leathery-faced cook braced upon the front seat, his booted feet far spread upon the scarred dashboard, his arms swaying stiffly to the pull of the four-horse team. Behind him still came the hoodlum wagon with its water barrels joggling sloppily behind the seat. Little Curley drove that, and little Curley's face was sober. It had been whispered in the bunk house that Skyrider was deep in disgrace, and Curley was worried.

On the porch of the bungalow Sudden stood with his morning cigar unlighted in his fingers, watching the little cavalcade swing past to the gate. He waved his cigar beckoningly to Bill Hayden, turned his head to shake it at something Mary V had said from the doorway, and waited for Bill to ride close.

Mary V, camouflaged in her blue *négligé* worn over her riding clothes, came out and stood insistently, her two hands clasped around Sudden's unwilling arm.

" No, sir, dad, I'm not going back to bed. I'm going to say every little thing I want to say, and you and Bill have both got to listen. Get off that horse,

Bill. He makes me nervous, dancing around like that. Heaven knows I'm just about raving distracted, as it is. Dad, give Bill that cigar so he won't look quite so disagreeable."

Bill looked inquiringly at Sudden. It did not seem to him that even so spoiled an offspring as Mary V should be permitted to delay him now, when minutes counted for a good deal. He wished briefly that Mary V belonged to him; Bill mistakenly believed that he would know how to handle her. Still, he took the cigar which Sudden obediently surrendered, and he got down off his horse and stood with one spurred foot lifted to the second step of the porch while he felt in his pocket for a match.

"Well, now, Bill's in a hurry, Mary V. We haven't got time——"

"You'd better take time, then! What's the use of Bill going off to Sinkhole unless he listens to me first? Do you think, for gracious sake, I've been riding around all over the country with my eyes shut? Or do I look near-sighted, or *what*? What do you suppose I laid awake all night for, piecing things that I know together, if you're not going to pay attention? Do you think, for gracious sake——"

"There, now, we don't want to get all excited, Mary V. Sit down here and stop for-gracious-saking, and tell dad and Bill what it is you've seen. If it's anything that'll help run down them horse thieves, you'll get that Norman car, kitten, if I have to pawn my watch." Sudden gave Bill a lightened look of hope, and pulled Mary V down beside him on the striped porch swing. Then he snorted at something he saw. "What's the riding breeches and boots for? Didn't I tell you——"

"Well, Bill's going to lend me Jake, and I'll be in a hurry."

"Like h——" Bill began explosively, and stopped himself in time.

"Just like that," Mary V told him calmly. "Dad, if Bill doesn't let me ride Jake, I don't believe I can remember some things I saw down on Sinkhole range —through the field glasses, from Snake Ridge. I shall feel so badly I'll just have to go into my room and lock the door and cry—all—day—long!" To prove it, Mary V's lips began to quiver and droop at the corners. To prepare for the deluge, Mary V got out her handkerchief.

Bill looked unhappy. "That horse ain't safe for yuh to ride," he temporized. "He's liable to run away and kill yuh. He——"

"I've ridden him twice, and he didn't," Mary V stopped quivering her lips long enough to retort. "I don't see why people want to be so mean to me, when I am trying my best to help about those horse thieves, and when I know things no other person on this ranch suspects, and if they did, they would simply be stunned at knowing there is a thief on their own pay roll. And when I just want Jake so I can hel-lp—and Tango is getting so lazy I simply *can't* get anywhere with him in a m-onth——" Mary V did it. She actually was crying real tears, that slipped down her cheeks and made little dark spots on her blue kimono.

Bill Hayden looked at Sudden with harassed eyes. Sudden looked at Bill, and smoothed Mary V's hair—figuratively speaking; in reality he drew his fingers over a silk-and-lace cap.

"H—well, it's up to your dad. You can ride Jake if he's willin' to take the chance of you getting your neck broke. I shore won't be responsible." Bill looked more unhappy than ever, not at all as though he gloried in his martyrdom to the Rolling R.

"Why, Jake's as gentle as a ki-kitten!" Mary V sobbed.

"Like hell he's gentle!" muttered Bill, so far under his breath that he did not feel called upon to apologize.

"Well, now, we'll talk about Jake later on. Tell dad and Bill what it was you saw, and what you mean by a thief on the pay roll. I don't promise I'll be simply stunned with surprise; that story young Jewel told last night does seem to have some awful weak points in it——"

"Why dad *Selmer!* You know perfectly well that Johnny Jewel is the soul of honour! Why you owe an *apology* to Johnny for ever *thinking* such a thing about him! Why, for gracious sake, must everybody on this ranch be so blind and stupid?" Mary V asked the glorious sunrise that question, and straightway hid her face behind her handkerchief.

"Well, now, we're wasting time. I apologize to the soul of honour, and you may ride Jake—when Bill or I are with you to see how he behaves. Now tell us what you know. This is a serious matter, Mary V. Far too serious——"

"I should think *I* am the person who knows how serious it is," Mary V came from behind her handkerchief to remind him.

"Just who or what did you see through your field glasses, when you looked from the top of Snake Ridge?" Sudden wisely chose to waive any irrelevant arguments.

"Why," said Mary V, "I first saw one of your men dodging along down a draw, to a place where there were some cottonwood trees. I saw him get off his horse and wait there for a few minutes, and then I saw another man riding along the gully from the other direction. And so I saw them meet, and talk

a few minutes, and ride back. And—your man was in a great hurry, and the other man was a Mexican."

"H-m-m. And who was my——"

"And so I thought I'd ride a little farther, and see what they were waving their hands toward the south for. And so I did. And it was very hot," said Mary V pensively, "and I was so tired that when I found I was close to Sinkhole Camp I went on and rested there. And before I left, that same Mexican came to the cabin, and Johnny didn't know him at all, because the Mexican said right away, 'I am the brother of Tomaso,' which of course, was to introduce himself. And then he saw me, and he said he had come to borrow some matches, and Johnny gave him some and he beat it. And after I left, I had gone perhaps a mile when I happened to look back, and the same Mexican was riding in a hurry to the cabin. So, of course, he had waited until I left. And that was the man," she finished with some attention to the dramatic effect, "who told Johnny he would take him to where the aeroplane was sitting like a hawk —a broken-winged hawk—on the burning sands of Mexico."

"Jerusalem!" Sudden paid tribute to the tale. But Bill said a shorter word. "And which one of my——"

"And it was right after that," Mary V went on calmly, "that you found your man at Sinkhole talking with a very bad cold. The second night, I—I was curious. And so after you had called him up, I called him. I had to wait a few minutes, as though he had to come into the house to answer. And *I* knew perfectly well that it was not Johnny speaking. I—tested him to make sure. I spoke of things that were perfectly ridiculous, and he was afraid to seem not to understand. I said I was Venus speaking, and

so he called me Miss Venus. And it was *not* that Mexican," she added quickly, seeing the guess in her dad's face. "He was a white man—an American. I can *almost* recognize the voice, in spite of his pretended cold. I jarred him away from that once or twice. He said, 'Uh course I knowed yer voice,' and no Mexican would say that."

"So then I was *very* curious. I—I knew Johnny would never permit things to be said that were said. So it was a beautiful moonlight evening, and I wanted —I shall be expected to describe our Arizona plains by moonlight. So I decided that I would solve a mystery and collect my material that evening, and I—went riding."

"The deuce you——"

"So I had quite a distance to go, and I did not want to worry anyone by being gone long. So I—er—didn't like to wake Bill up——"

"Hunh!" from Bill, this time.

"I really intended to take Tango as usual," Mary V explained with dignity. "I had no thought of intruding on a person's piggishness with their old race horse, but Jake came right up and put his nose in the feed pan, and—and acted so—sort of eager —and I knew he just suffers for exercise, standing in that old corral, so it was very wrong, but I yielded to him. I rode him down to Sinkhole, and I found him a perfectly gentle lady's horse. So there now. Mr. Bill. You just——"

"And what did you find at Sinkhole?" Sudden led her firmly back to the subject.

"I found that the beans were sour, and the bread was hard as a rock, and there wasn't one thing to show that a meal had been cooked in that camp for two days, at least. And Johnny's bedding was gone —or some of it, anyway. And so was Sandy. So

I came back, and changed horses, and took Tango. I knew, of course, how stingy a person can be about a horse. And as I was riding away, behind that line of rocks so Mr. Stingy wouldn't see me, I saw a certain person come sneaking up to the corral and turn his horse inside. It was just barely daylight then, but it was the same person I saw meet the Mexican.

"And I hurried back to Snake Ridge, so I got there quite early in the morning. And I saw two men ride off toward the eastern line of Sinkhole range, and they were not Johnny Jewel at all, which would be perfectly impossible. Because soon afterwards I saw something very queer being hauled by mules, and that was Johnny bringing home his aeroplane, perfectly innocent."

"Who's the fellow——" Sudden and Bill spoke together, the question which harried the minds of both.

"Of course," said Mary V, "I understand that some one from the ranch would have to put them up to distracting Johnny's attention by letting him have that aeroplane. I can see that they would want to keep him busy so he wouldn't pay so much attention to the horses down there, and would not notice a few horses gone now and then. So somebody had heard about the aeroplane, and told them that Johnny was perfectly mad about aviation, and——"

Sudden turned, and took her by the shoulders. "Mary V, who was that man? Don't try to shield him, because I shall——"

"The very idea! I don't want to shield him at all. I merely want Jake, without any strings on him whatever. Because he can go like the very dickens, and I want to keep an eye on Tex myself. He won't pay any attention——"

"Tex! Good Lord! Bill, you——"

"Listen, dad, I think I *deserve* to have Jake. You *know* I can ride him, and you're so short-handed, and I can watch Tex——"

"Go saddle him up for her, Bill, will you? I guess the kid's done enough to put her on a par with the rest of us."

"I'll say she has," Bill surrendered, a grin splitting his leathery face straight across the middle. "I been watchin' Tex myself, but I didn't know it was horses he was after. I thought it was some woman."

"I can't see what *makes* men so stupid!" Mary V observed pensively. "I never did like Tex. I don't like his eyes."

"I see," said her dad. "You ought to've told me before." And he added disapprovingly. "There's a good deal you ought to've told your dad. It would have saved the Rolling R some mighty fine horses, I reckon. I don't know what your mother's going to say about me letting you go——"

But Mary V had whisked into the house to complete her preparations for the day's ride. Also to escape whatever her dad would have to say in that particular tone. She saw him leave the porch and follow Bill to the corral, whereupon she immediately tried to call Johnny on the telephone. Failing in that, she proceeded to powder her nose.

CHAPTER XXI

MARY V WILL NOT BE BLUFFED

OLD SUDDEN in the ranch Ford, and Bill and Mary V on horseback, overtook the jogging cavalcade of riders and loose horses. Sudden looked pained and full of determination, as he always did when necessity called him forth upon the range in a lurching mechanical conveyance where once he had ridden with the best of them. Too many winters had been spent luxuriously in the towns; a mile or two, at a comfortable trail trot, was all that Sudden cared to attempt nowadays on horseback. But that did not lessen his dislike of negotiating sand and rocks and washes and rough slopes with an automobile. Every mile that he travelled added something to his condemnation of that young reprobate, Johnny Jewel, who had let the Rolling R in for all this trouble.

A bend in the trail brought him close to the boys, who had ridden straight across country. Mary V and Bill had just joined the group, and Sudden gave a snort when he saw Mary V manœuvre Jake so that he sidled in alongside Tex, who rode a little apart with his hat pulled over his eyes, evidently in deep thought. Sudden had all the arrogance of a strong man who has managed his life and his business successfully. He wanted to attend to Tex himself, without any meddling from Mary V.

He squawked the horn to attract her attention, and caused a wave of turbulence among the horses that made more than one of his men say unpleasant things about him. Mary V looked back, and he beckoned with one sweeping gesture that could scarcely be mistaken. Mary V turned to ride up to him, advanced a rod or two and abruptly retreated, bolting straight through the group of riders and careening away across the level, with Bill and Tex tearing after her. Presently they slowed, and later Bill was seen to lag behind. Tex and Mary V kept straight on, a furlong in advance of the others.

The road swung away to the right, to avoid a rough stretch of rocks and gullies, and Sudden perforce followed it, feelingly speaking his mind upon the subjects of spoiled daughters and good-for-nothing employees, and horses and the men that bestrode them, and Fords, and the roads of Arizona, and the curse of being too well fed and growing a paunch that made riding a martyrdom. He would put that girl in a convent, and he would see that she stayed there till she was old enough to have some sense. He would have that young hound at Sinkhole arrested as an accomplice of the horse thieves. He would put a bullet through that fool of a horse, Jake, and he would lynch Tex if he ever got his hands on him. He would sell out, by glory, and buy himself a prune orchard.

And then he had a blow-out while he was down in a hollow a mile from the outfit. And some darned fool had lost the handle to the jack, and the best of the two extra tyres was a darn poor excuse and wouldn't last a mile, probably, and he got hold of a tube that had a leaky valve, and had to hunt out another one after he had worked half an hour trying to pump up the first one. And what in the blinkety

blink did any darn fool want to live in such a country for, anyway?

Thus it happened that Mary V was not forbidden to ride with Tex. And, not being forbidden, Mary carried out her own ideas of diplomacy and tact. Her idea was to make Tex believe that she liked him better than the other boys. Just what she would gain by that, Mary V did not stop to wonder. It was the approved form of diplomacy, employed by all the leading heroines of ancient and modern fiction and of film drama, and was warranted to produce results in the way of information, guilty secrets, stolen wills, plots and plans and papers.

Tex was inclined to eye her askance, just at first. He was also very curious about her riding Jake, and he seemed inquisitive about whether that was the first time she had ever ridden him. He was, too, very absent-minded at times, and would go off into vacant-eyed reveries that sealed his ears against her artfully artless chatter.

Some girls would have been discouraged. Mary V was merely stimulated to further efforts. Tex did not mention the stealing of any horses at Sinkhole. He seemed to take it for granted that they were going to work the range to get horses for breaking, and Mary V wondered if perhaps her dad had not thought it best to confine the knowledge of horse-stealing to himself and Bill—at least until he had made an investigation. That would be like dad—and also like Bill Hayden. Mary V was glad that she had not said anything about it. She thought she would try Tex out first on the subject of aeroplanes. None of the boys knew that Johnny had one, and she was perfectly sure that she would detect any guilty knowledge of it in the mind of Tex. She had just read a long article in a magazine

about "How our Faces Betray our Thoughts," and this seemed a splendid chance to put it to the test.

"Bill says an aeroplane came and stampeded all you boys yesterday," she began with much innocence.

"Yeah. One did fly over our haids. I didn't git to see much of it. My fool hawse, he started in pitchin' right away, soon as he seen it."

Mary V paused, meditating upon the significance of his words, his tone, his profile. That there was no particular significance did not in the least affect her deliberate intention.

"I wonder who it could have been!" she said, stealing a glance from under her lashes.

"Hunh? Who? The flyin' machine? Search me!" This time his tone was surely significant. It signified, more than anything else, that the mind of Tex was busy with other matters. Contrary to the magazine article, his face did not betray his thoughts. "Yore dad buy Jake off'n Bill for yo'-all to ride?" he asked suddenly.

"No. Bill just lent him to me."

"Hnh! Bill, he shore is generous-hearted to lend yuh Jake."

"Yes," said Mary V, smiling at Tex innocently. "Yes, isn't he?"

But Tex did not reiterate, as pleasant converse demanded. He went off again into meditation so deep that it quite excluded Mary V.

"Yo'-all going to help round up?" Tex asked her suddenly. "You shore can ride the ridges, with that hawse. I guess yo'-all can ring in more hawses than what any two of us kin."

"That's exactly what I mean to do," Mary V assured him promptly. "You'll see me riding the ridges almost exclusively."

Tex looked at her and grinned, which did not enhance his good looks, because his teeth were badly stained with tobacco.

"Yo'-all don't want to ride away over in them breaks toward the south-east corner," he advised. "That's a long, hard ride to make. It's too much for a girl to tackle—combin' the hawses outa them little brushy draws. They like to git in there away from the flies, in the heat uh the day. But yo'-all better not tackle it, even if Bill lets yuh. I don't guess he would, though."

"Bill," said Mary V with a little tilt to her chin, "does not enjoy the privilege of 'letting' me do things. I shall ride wherever I please. And it is possible that I may please to bring in what horses are in the red-hill end of the range. I'm sure I don't see why I shouldn't, if I like."

"Well," said Tex, "that country's plumb hard to ride. It takes real work to bring in hawses from there. I wouldn't tackle that, if I was you; I'd ride out where it's easier."

"Oh, would you? Well, thank you very much for the advice, I'm sure." Mary V looked back, saw the other boys jogging closer, and held Jake in to wait for them. She did not want to tell Tex that she certainly would make it a point to ride the red-hill side of the range. There was probably some sly, secret reason why Tex did not want her to go over that way. She remembered that she had seen the Mexican coming from that direction both times. Certainly there must be some secret reason. Tex was afraid she might find out something.

Mary V waited for the boys, and talked to them prettily, and wondered aloud where her dad was all this time, and hoped he had not had a puncture or anything. Because, she said, it was bad enough for

his temper to have to drive the flivver, without any bad luck to make it worse.

She was particularly nice to Bill, and forced him to confess that she really got along perfectly all right with Jake. She comported herself so agreeably, in fact, that Bill was reconciled to her coming and paid no attention when she presently swung off to the south-east, saying that she wanted to get a picture of a perfectly ducky giant cactus which she had seen through her glasses one day. Indeed, the dismal honking of the machine called Bill back to the trail, where Sudden came jouncing along like a little leaky boat labouring through a choppy sea. Bill rode off without noticing Mary V at all.

It was a little after noon, and the boys were eating dinner at the camp set up close to the creek at Sinkhole cabin. Sudden, sprawled in the shade of the wagon, was staring glumly at the sluggish little stream, smoking his after-dinner cigar and trying to formulate some plan that would promise results where results were most vital to his bank account. It would, of course, take two or three days to gather in all the horses on Sinkhole range, and the restless lot in the corral yonder might be a large or a small part of the entire number down there. Sudden was not worrying so much over those that were left, as he was over what had been stolen. It seemed to him that there ought to be some way of getting those horses back. He was trying to think of the way.

"Oh, Bill!" he called, getting stiffly to his feet. "Let's get into the cabin and go over those tally books." Which was merely a subterfuge to get Bill away from the wagon without letting the boys know something was wrong. Bill got up, brushed the dirt off his trousers with a flick of his fingers, lighted the cigarette he had just rolled and followed the boss.

" Bill. what's your idea about this horse-stealing, anyway ? If they were going to steal horses, why didn't they run off a whole herd and be done with it ? "

Bill seated himself on Johnny's bunk, spat toward the stove, pulled a splinter off the rough board of the bunk's side, and began carefully nipping off tiny shreds with his finger nails. Bill, by all these signs and tokens, was limbering up his keen old range-bred wits for action.

" Well, I'll tell yuh. The way to get at the thing is to figger out why you'd do it, s'posin' you was in their place. Now if it was *me* that was stealin' these hawses—say, s'posin' I was aimin' to sell 'em over across the line—I'd aim to take the best I could git holt of, because I'd be wanting 'em for good, all-round, tough saddle hawses. Them greasers, the way they're hellin' around over the country shootin' and fightin', they got to have good hawses under 'em. Er they want good hawses, if they can git 'em.

" Well, s'posin' 't I was out to furnish what I could. Chances is I wouldn't have a very big bunch in with me—say five or six of us, jest enough to handle a few head at a time. I'd aim to git 'em over acrost the line first shot. Anybody would do that. Well, s'posin' I didn't have a place that'd take care of very many at a time. Feed's pore, over there, and a hawse has got to eat. These here hawses are in purty fair condition, and I'd aim to keep 'em in flesh whilst I was breakin' 'em—I'd git better prices. And then again, mebby I wouldn't want too many on hand at once, in case some party come along with the gall to loot 'em instead of buy 'em.

" I figger I'd be plumb content if I could take over a few at a time, and let the rest go ahead eatin' grass here till I was ready for 'em. The longer I

could keep that up, the better I'd like it. Same as we been doin' at the home ranch, y' see. We didn't go 't work and haze in the hull bunch and keep 'em up, eatin' their heads off, waitin' till we got ready for 'em. No, sir, we go out and bring in half a dozen, or a dozen at most and cut out what we want. We bust them, and git more.

" I figger, Mr. Selmer, that these geezers down here have been doin' that very same way. They had the kid baited with that flyin' machine, so he wouldn't have no eyes for anything else. And he was *here,* so you wouldn't be worryin' none about the stock. And they've been helpin' theirselves at their own convenience—like Mary V would put it. I dunno, but that's the way I figger it. And I don't guess, Mr. Selmer, you'll see none of yore hawses again, unless mebby it's the last ones they took. And I don't guess there's very much chance of gittin' them back, either, because we don't know wherebouts they took 'em to. Way I look at it, you're doin' about the only thing that can be did—cleanin' out this range and drivin' the hawses all up on the north range. That kinda leaves the jam pot empty when they come lickin' their lips for more of the same."

" Well, I guess you're right, Bill. And how do you figure young Jewel not being here ? His saddle is out there in the shed, and all his horses are here."

" Him ? " Bill laughed a little. " Me, I don't aim to do no figgerin' about Skyrider. He's got his flyin' machine workin', though, accordin' to Mary V, I guess Skyrider has mebby flew the country. He'd likely think it was about time—way he gummed things up around here."

Sudden permitted himself a snort, probably in agreement with Bill's statement that things were " gummed up " at Sinkhole. He went to the door

and stood looking out, his face sour as one may expect a face to be when thoughts of loss are behind it.

"Where's Mary V?" he turned abruptly to ask of Bill.

"Mary V? Why, I guess she went home. Said something about takin' a picture of some darn thing; she never come on with the boys to camp, anyhow."

"She didn't go foolin' off with Tex, did she?"

"Tex? No, Tex rode after stock. Had some trouble with his hawse. I heard him tellin' the boys. Said his hawse run away with him. Come in all lathered up."

Sudden turned back, went to the telephone, changed his mind. No use worrying her mother by asking if she had got home, he thought.

"You're sure she went home?" his eyes dwelt rather sharply upon Bill's lean, leathery face. Bill looked up from the slow disintegration of the splinter. He spat toward the stove again, looked down at the splinter, and then got up quite unexpectedly.

"Hell, no! I ain't shore, but I can quick enough find out." He brushed past Sudden and took long steps toward the camp. Sudden followed him.

The boys were standing in a group, holding their hat brims down to shield their eyes from the bitter glare of the sun while they gazed up into the sky, their faces turned towards the south. A speck was scudding across the blue—a speck that rapidly grew larger, circled downward in a great, easy spiral. Sudden and Bill perforce turned and held their own hat brims while they looked.

"Sa-ay, if that there's Skyrider sailin' around in an airship, he's shore got the laugh on us fellers," Aleck observed, squinting his nose until his gums showed red above his teeth. "Look at 'im come down, would yuh!"

"Wonder where he got it?" little Curley hazarded. "I always told you fellers——"

"Does anybody know where Mary V went?" Sudden's voice brought them all facing him. They looked at him uncomprehendingly for a minute, then uncertainly at one another.

"Why—she was going to take a picture of a cactus. I dunno where she went after that." This was Bud, a shade of uneasiness creeping into his face.

"Which way did she go? Toward home?"

"She started that way—back toward Snake Ridge——"

"I seen her riding east," Curley broke in. "Jake shore was pickin' 'em up and layin' 'em down too. I thought at first he was running off with her, but he wasn't. He slowed down, climbin' that lava slope—and after that I didn't see no more of 'er."

Sudden looked at his watch, frowning a little. Mary V probably was all right; there was nothing unusual in her absence. But this country south of Snake Ridge was closer to the lawless land across the boundary than he liked. Their very errand down there gave proof enough of its character. North of Snake Ridge, Sudden would merely have stored away a lecture for Mary V. Down here at Sinkhole——

"You boys get out and hunt her up!" he snapped, almost as though they were to blame for her absence. "I didn't tell you before, but I'm telling you now that rustlers have been at work down here and that's why we're taking the horses off this range. This is no place for Mary V to be riding around by herself."

"It's a wonder he wouldn't of woke up to that fact before," Bud grumbled to Aleck, while he went limping to the corral. "If she was a girl uh mine, she'd be home with her maw, where she belongs!"

"Rustlers—that sounds like greasers had been at

work here. Runnin' hawses acrost the line. For Lord sake, git a faster wiggle on than that limp, Bud! If that poor little kid meets up with a bunch of them damn renegades——"

Bud swore and increased his pace in spite of the pain. Others were before him. Already Tex had his loop over the head of a speedy horse, and was leading it toward his saddle. Curley, the quickest of them all, was giving frantic tugs to his latigo. Bill was in the saddle ready to direct the search, and Sudden was standing by his car, wondering whether it would be possible to negotiate that rough country to the eastward with a "mechanical bronk."

Nothing much was said. You would have thought, to look at them, that they were merely in a hurry to get back to the work. Nevertheless, if it should happen that Mary V was being annoyed or in any danger, it would go hard with the miscreants if the Rolling R boys once came within sight of them.

CHAPTER XXII

LUCK TURNS TRAITOR

JOHNNY JEWEL, carrying the propeller balanced on his shoulder and his rifle in the other hand—and perspiring freely with the task—came hurrying through the sage brush, following the faint trail his own eager feet had worn in the sand. His eyes were turned frowning upon the ground, his lips were set together in the line of stubbornness.

He tilted the propeller against the adobe wall of the cabin and went in without noticing that the door was open instead of closed as he had left it. He was at the telephone when Sudden stepped in after him. Johnny looked over his shoulder with wide, startled eyes.

"Oh. I was just going to call up the ranch," he said with the brusqueness of a man whose mind is concentrated on one thing.

"What you want of the ranch?" Sudden's tone was non-committal. Here was the fellow that had caused all this trouble and worry and loss. Sudden meant to deal with him as he deserved, but that did not mean he would fly into a passion and handicap his judgment.

"I want the boys, if you can get hold of them. I've located the ranch where they've been taking those horses to that they stole. There's some there

now—or there was. I went down and let down the fence of the little field they had 'em in, and headed 'em for the gap. There wasn't anybody around but two women—an old one and a young one—and some kids. They spluttered a lot, but I went ahead anyway. There's about a dozen Rolling R horses I turned loose. The brands were blotched, but I knew 'em anyway.

" So I got 'em outa the field, and then we went back to the plane and circled around and come up on 'em from the south, and flew low enough to scare 'em good, but not enough to scatter 'em like that bunch up at the ranch scattered. They high-tailed it this way, and I guess they'll keep coming, all right, if they aren't turned back again. The boys can pick 'em up.

" If the boys could come down I think they could get a whack at the rustlers themselves. I got a sight of 'em, with a little bunch of horses, as I was coming back. Far as I could see, they didn't notice the plane—we were high, and soon as I saw 'em I had Bland shut off the motor and glide. They must have camped just across the line till they got a bunch together, or something. They were taking their time, and if the boys could get down here right away, I believe we could get 'em. If not, I'll go back and stampede the horses this way, and see if I can't get me a greaser or two. We had to come back and fill up the tank again, anyway. I didn't want to get caught the way those other fellows did. Is Bill at the ranch, Mr. Selmer ? "

It speaks well for Sudden Selmer that he could listen to this amazing statement without looking dazed. As it was, his first bewildered stare subsided into mere astonishment. Later other emotions crept in. By the time Johnny had finished his headlong

report, Sudden had recovered his mental poise and was able to speak coherently.

" Been hunting horses with a flying machine, eh ? I must say you're right up to date, young man. No, Bill isn't at the ranch. If you'd keep your eyes open here at home, same as you do when you're flying around next the clouds, you'd see the chuck wagon down there by the creek. I moved 'em down here to save what horses are left. The boys are out now hunting up Mary V. She had to go larruping off by herself on Bill's horse Jake, and she hasn't come back yet. I guess she's all right ; but the boys went after her so as not to take any chances. I'm kinda hoping the kid went home. I don't like to scare her mother, though, by calling up to see."

Johnny's eyes had widened and grown round, just as they always did when something stirred him unexpectedly. " I could call up, Mr. Selmer, and ask if I can speak to Mary V. That wouldn't scare her mother."

" Sure, you can find out ; only don't you say anything about the wagons being camped here. If she asks, say you haven't seen us yet. She'll think we made camp somewhere else. Go ahead."

It did not take long, and when Johnny turned to Selmer he had the white line around his mouth. " She says Mary V went out with you and the boys, to a round-up somewhere down this way."

" Well, maybe she just rode farther than she intended. But she was on Jake ; she deviled us into letting her take him. Bill thinks Jake isn't very safe. I don't think he is, either. You say the rustlers were away down across the line, driving a bunch of horses, so there's no danger——"

" I didn't say all of them were down that way. I don't know how many there are. They were just

little dots crawling along—but I guessed there were about four riders." Johnny started for the door, picking up his rifle from the table where he had placed it. "I wish I'd got after 'em as I wanted to, but Bland kept hollerin about gas——" He balanced the propeller on his shoulder again, and turned to Sudden. "Don't you worry, Mr. Selmer, we'll get right out after her, Which way did she go? There's times when an aeroplane comes in kinda handy, after all!"

"You young hound, there wouldn't be all this hell-apoppin' if it wasn't for you and your bederned aeroplane! Don't overlook that fact. You've managed to hold up all my plans, and lose me Lord-knows-how-many horses that are probably the pick of the herds; and you're got the gall to crow because your flying machine will fly! And if that girl of mine's in any trouble, it'll be your fault more than anybody's. If you'd stuck to your job and done what I've been paying you wages to do——"

"You don't have to rub all that in, Mr. Selmer. I guess I know it better than you do. Just because I don't come crying around you with a lot of please-forgive-me stuff, you think I don't give a cuss! Which way did Mary V go? That's more important right now than naming over all the kinds of damn fools I've been. I can sing that song backwards. Which way——"

"She went east. Damn yuh, don't yuh stand there talking back to me, or I'll——"

"Oh, go to—war," said Johnny sullenly, and hitched the propeller to a better balance on his shoulder, and went striding back whence he had come.

He had not meant to crow. He knew perfectly well what harm he had wrought. He was doing what he could to undo that harm, and he was at that high pitch of self-torment when the lash of another was

unbearable. He did not want to quarrel with the boss, but no human being could have reproached Johnny then without receiving some of the bitterness which filled Johnny's soul.

He routed Bland out of a nap and commanded him to make ready for another flight. Bland protested, with his usual whine against extra work, and got a look from Johnny that sent him hurrying around the plane to make his regular before-flying inspection.

Fifteen minutes after Johnny's arrival the plane was quivering outside on the flying field, and Bland was pulling down his goggles while Johnny kicked a small rock away from a wheel and climbed up to straddle into the rear seat, carrying his rifle with him—to the manifest discomfort of Bland, who was "gun-shy."

"Fly a kinda zigzag course east tell I tell yuh to swing south," Johnny called, close to Bland's ear. "Miss Selmer's off that way somewhere. If you see her, don't fly low enough to scare her horse—keep away a little and hunt a landing. I'll tell yuh when to land, same as before."

He settled back, and Bland nodded, glanced right and left, eased the motor on and started. They took the air and climbed steadily, circling until they had the altitude Johnny wanted. Then, swinging away toward Snake Ridge, they worked eastward. Johnny did not use the controls at all. He wanted all his mind for scanning the country spread out below them.

Ridges, arroyos, brushy flats—Johnny's eyes went over them all. Almost before they had completed the first circle he spied a rider, then two—and over to the right a couple more, scattered out and riding eastward. Johnny wished that he could have

speech with the boys, could tell them what he meant to do. But he knew too well how the horses would feel about the plane, so he kept on, skimming high over their heads like a great humming dragon-fly. He saw them crane necks to watch him, saw the horses plunge and try to bolt. Then they were far behind, and his eyes were searching anxiously the landscape below.

Mary V, it occurred to him suddenly, might be lying hurt. Jake might have thrown her—though on second thought that was not likely, for Mary V was too good a rider to be thrown unless a horse pitched rather viciously. Jake would run away, would rear and plunge and sidle when fear gripped him or his temper was up, but Johnny had never heard of his pitching. Jake was not a range-bred horse, and if there was a buck-jump in his system, it had never betrayed itself. After all, Mary V's chance of lying hurt was minimized by the very fact that she rode Jake.

Red Hill came sliding rapidly toward them. Now it was beneath, and the plane had risen sharply to the air current that flowed steadily over the hill. It swooped down again—they were over the flat where he had seen the riders. The line of fence showed like knotted thread drawn across the land. And within it was no Mary V.

Johnny tapped Bland's shoulder for a circle to the north, hoping that she might be riding back that way. He strained his eyes, and saw tiny dots of horses feeding quietly, but no rider moving anywhere. He sent Bland swinging southward, while he leaned a little and watched the swift-sliding panorama of arid land beneath. It was a rough country, as Tex had said. To look for one little moving speck in all that veined network of little ridges and draws

was enough to tax quicker, keener eyes than Johnny Jewel's.

But Johnny would not think of failure. Somewhere he would see her; he would circle and seek until he did find her—if she were there.

Twice they sailed round, keeping within the boundaries of the east and south fences. Then, flying as low as was safe, Johnny turned south, along the course which he believed the horse thieves to have followed. It did not seem possible—rather, he did not want to think it possible—that they should have met Mary V. But Mexico is always Mexico, and sinister things do happen along its border. The boys were coming on horseback, and they would scatter and comb the draws which Johnny had looked down into as he passed over. He would leave that closer search to the boys, while he himself went farther—as far as Jake could travel in half a day.

They reached the south fence, left it dwindling behind them. Minutes brought them over the invisible line which divides lawful country from lawless. They went on, until Johnny spied again the group of stolen horses being herded loosely in a shallow arroyo where there was a little sparse grass. The men he did not at first see, save the one on herd. Then he thought he could detect them sprawled in the shade of a few stunted trees.

Apparently they felt safe, close though they were to the line. Indeed, they were safe enough—from horsemen riding down from the Rolling R. So far they had thieved at their leisure and with impunity. The element of risk had been discounted until they no longer considered it at all, except when they were actually within the Rolling R boundaries. Now, in the heat of the day, they slept as was their habit.

Even the herder was probably dozing in the saddle and leaving watchfulness to his cow-pony. Certainly he did not give any sign that he saw the aeroplane as it glided silently over so that they could come back from the south.

"What I want, Bland, is to scare these horses back toward home," Johnny said. "We'll come at 'em first from the south, and if they don't run straight, we'll have to circle round till they do. But I want to come within shooting distance of them hombres under the trees. See? So fly as low as yuh dare when we come back."

Bland threw on the motor, circled, and came volplaning back. He did not complain; he left that for times when he was not flying. Johnny braced himself, rifle ready. He was sorry then that he was not an expert shot; but he hoped that luck would be with him and make up for what he lacked in skill.

The horses stampeded, carrying the herder with them. They ran north, in a panic that would keep them going for some time. As they raced clattering past the camp, Johnny saw four men rise up hastily, their faces turned to the sky. He leaned, took what aim was possible, and fired four shots as the plane swept over.

He did not hit any one, so far as he could see, but he saw them duck and run close to the tree trunks, which gave him some satisfaction. Moreover, they were afoot. Not a single horse remained within sight or hearing of that camp.

Johnny did not go back for another try at them, though he was tempted to land and fight it out with them. There was Mary V to think of, and there were the horses. They went on, shying off from the fleeing animals lest they drive them back instead of forward. Bland spiralled upward, waiting to see

what Johnny wanted next. Whatever it might be Bland would do it—with two guns and a headstrong young man just behind him.

The thrum of the motor stuttered a little on the last upward turn. Bland straightened out the plane, fussed with the spark and the gas, banked cautiously around and headed for home. Like a heart that skips a beat now and then, an odd little pause, scarcely to be distinguished except when the ear has become accustomed to the rhythm of perfect firing, manifested itself. Bland turned his head sidewise, listening. The pause became more marked. The steady, forward thrust slackened a little. Johnny was aware that the monotonous waste below did not slip behind them quite so fast; not quite.

Bland was nursing the motor along, Johnny could tell by his slight movements. It seemed to him that a tenseness had crept into the set of Bland's head. Johnny braced himself for something—just what, he did not know. His knowledge of motors was superficial. Something was wrong with the ignition, he guessed, but he had no idea what it could be.

A sick feeling of thwarted purpose came over him. He knew it was not fear. He felt as though he could not possibly be afraid in an aeroplane, however much reason he might have for fear. He felt betrayed, as though this wonderful piece of mechanism, for which he had paid so dear a price and which he worshipped in proportion, had suddenly turned traitor. It was failing him, just when his need of it was so vital. Just when he had so much to retrieve, just when he had counted on its help in re-establishing his self-respect.

Bland turned his head, and gave Johnny a fleeting glance from the corner of one eye. Bland's face was a sallow white.

Johnny laid down his rifle and carefully placed feet and hands on the controls. Bland might get scared and lose his head, and if he did, Johnny did not want to be altogether at his mercy. Anyway, Bland did not know the country.

"How far will she glide?" Johnny shouted above the sputtering cough of the motor. But Bland only shook his head slowly from right to left and back again. Bland's ears were a waxy white now, and the line of his jaw had sharpened. Johnny believed that Bland would fail him too.

They were gliding down an invisible incline, and it was a long way to Sinkhole. Johnny began to think feverishly of certain sandy patches, bare of brush and rocks, and to estimate distances. Now they crossed the line fence and were over the rough country below Red Hill, and the plane was lifting and falling to the uneven currents like a boat riding the waves. Gliding parallel with a dry tributary of Sinkhole Creek, the plane side-slipped and came perilously close to disaster. Bland righted it, but Johnny held his breath at the way the ground had jumped up at them.

Ahead, and a little to one side, three riders went creeping up a slope. They seemed to be heading toward Sinkhole Camp, and Johnny signalled Bland to keep off, and so avoid scaring the horses. But the slight detour cost them precious feet of altitude while the nearest sandy stretch was yet far off.

The earth was rising with incredible swiftness to meet them. The nearest landing Johnny could think of was farther over, across Sinkhole Creek. He did not believe they could make it, but he headed for it desperately and felt Bland yielding to his control.

Rocks, brush, furrowed pitches; rocks, brush. Ahead, they could see the irregular patch of yellow

that was sand. But the brush seemed fairly to leap at them, the rocks grew malignantly larger while they looked, the ditches deepened ominously. Over these the frail thing of cloth and little strips of wood and wire and the delicate, dumb motor, skimmed like a weary-winged bird. Bland flattened it out, coaxed it to keep the air. Lower, lower—a high bush was flicked by a wheel in passing. On a little farther, and yet a little.

She landed just at the edge of the goal. The loose sand dragged at the wheels, flipped the plane on its nose so suddenly that Johnny never did know just how it happened. Bland had feared that sand, and braced himself. But Johnny did not know. His head had snapped forward against the rim of the cowl—a terrible blow that sent him sagging inertly against the trap that held him. Bland got out, took one look at Johnny, and sank down weakly upon the sand.

CHAPTER XXIII

DREAMS AND DARKNESS

JOHNNY dreamed two separate dreams. The first dream was confused and fragmentary. He seemed to hear certain sentences spoken while he was whirling through space with the Milky Way flinging stars at him. As nearly as he could remember afterwards, this is what he heard.

Mary V's voice: "Don't be so stupid! If a girl happens to bring in two perfectly banditish outlaws that imagine they are kidnapping her, why must she be lectured, pray tell? If a man had done it——"

Mumble, mumble, and a buzzing in Johnny's head.

Bland's voice: "I don't know as I could tell. He could, if he should come to. We got 'em headed this way——"

Bill's voice: "—and I seen him hittin' for the line and headed him off——"

More mumbling.

Mary V's voice: "I can't see why he doesn't hurry! Why, for gracious sake, must a person lie forever out in the sun when he's all smashed——"

Bland's voice: "—not as much as yuh might think, in all this brush. I ain't gone over it yet—" (mumble) "—short circuit—" (mumble, buzz-buzz) "went past me so close I could feel the wind—" (mumble) "—I dunno. I've seen 'em

hurt worse and get over it, and I've seen 'em die when you'd think——"

After that it was all mumble and buzz, and then more stars, and blackness and silence.

Piecing together the fragments, as Johnny could not do, here is the interpretation.

The three riders whom Johnny had seen as the plane was dipping to its final fall were Mary V, Tomaso, and Tomaso's brother. Mary V had gone off to ride the country which Tex had said was too difficult for her—" and it was *not* too difficult for a person who had any brains or any gumption and who did not lose all the sense a person had," etc. She had gone some distance toward the south-east boundary, and Jake was behaving like a perfect dear. She had seen a few horses, and they had all run every which way when they got sight of her, so she was keeping right along and planning to just gently urge them toward Sinkhole as she came back.

Well, and on the way back she had seen the young Mexican riding along, and he had looked perfectly harmless and innocent, and he had a rag tied around his head besides, and kept putting his hand up, and wabbling in the saddle exactly as though he was just about ready to fall off his horse. And how, for gracious sake, was a person going to know he was only pretending and not sick or hurt a speck, but merely taking a low and mean advantage of a person's kindness of heart?

Well, and so she had let him come up to her, and he had asked her if she had any water with her. And she had, and so she twisted around in the saddle to untie the canteen, and Jake kept stepping around, so the young Mexican just reached out and held Jake by the bridle while she got the water—and how was a person to know that he was not trying to

help but was kidnapping a person's horse and herself in the most treacherous manner ever heard of?

Just when she had got the canteen untied, and was unscrewing the cap to give it to the boy, another Mexican rode up behind, and he had the most insipid smile on his face, and a detestable way of trying to be polite. And he said it was a nice horse she was riding, and he would like to show that horse to his brother, if she would be so kind to come with him. It would not be far, he said, and they would show her the way. And they went on talking in the most detestable manner, and actually forced her to go along with them. They had guns, and they said they would shoot her in a perfectly polite way.

So Mary V had gone back with them toward the line fence, because the fat one rode behind her with a gun and the boy had a gun, too, and they said they would not tie her hands if she would be good, because there was a swarm of gnats and little flies that kept pestering so, and she had to brush them away from her face.

They kept down in hollows, and mostly they had to go single file, with the boy in front and the detestable one behind. But after awhile they had to climb over a ridge, and the horses were picking their own way, and the horrid one got off to one side, where Mary V could see him out of the corner of her eye. And he was not watching her very closely, and the gun was not pointing at her as she naturally supposed it would be, from what he said.

So Mary V very carefully turned in her heel, and watched her chance, and gave Jake a kick in the ribs. And Jake did exactly as a person expected, and gave a big jump against the horse of the boy. And the fat one did not shoot after all, because he thought it was Jake that did it himself.

So Mary V, having reached into her riding skirt and got her gun, whirled Jake around and took a shot at the fat one before he saw what she meant to do. And she hit him in the hand where he was holding the gun across the saddle horn, which was careless of him, but, of course, he never *dreamed* that Mary V had a gun and would use it.

So the gun dropped on the ground, and the man tried to grab his hand and his side at the same time, because the bullet hit his side too. And then Mary V got Jake down off his hind feet where he had stood with surprise, and made the boy drop his gun. And they were there on the ground yet, just where they dropped them, because Mary V thought they were safer there than being picked up by anyone present.

So that was all there was to it. The fat one was all wilted down in the saddle, and their ponies were used to shooting and just stopped and stood there thankful that they had an excuse, because the poor things were terribly hot and sweaty and tired. And Mary V made the boy get off and back up to her, which was some trouble on account of Jake and the gun she had to hold ready to shoot, so she only had one hand for Jake, really. And she was going to take the rag off his head to tie his hands the best she could under the circumstances, but the boy would not do as she said, but instead tried to run away and duck into the bushes. And that was how the boy got shot in the leg. It seemed a pity to do it, still a person couldn't surely be expected to tie outlaws and hold a gun and hold Jake and everything, and not mess them up any. He seemed a kind of nice boy, and his tricky ways were no doubt because he had not been raised properly.

So she made him get on his horse, which was difficult on account of being shot in the leg, and then it

seemed cruel and unnecessary to tie him, because they had both been sufficiently shot by her to know what they might expect if they did it again. And that was how it happened that she drove them both ahead of her without being tied or anything, as a person would naturally expect outlaws and horse thieves and kidnappers would be. But Mary V would like to know how, for gracious sake, a person could do *everything* right, with a horse to manage and a gun to hold, and only two hands to their name?

What Bill had said was that he had kept an eye on Tex, because it looked to him like Tex was at the bottom of the whole business. He had seen Tex working away from the others, innocent as a hen turkey with a nest hid out in the weeds. Bill had done some innocent kinda sidlin' off himself, and he had seen Tex suddenly duck into a narrow wash and disappear.

Wherefore, knowing the country even better than did Tex, Bill had ducked into another draw that would intercept Tex, if Tex was going where Bill guessed he was aiming to go. Tex must have aimed that way, because Bill got him and brought him back with his hands tied behind him and his gun riding in Bill's holster, and with no bullet holes in his person such as Mary V's captives carried.

Johnny did not know that the other boys had been signalled back with shots, and that the prisoners had been turned over to them while Bill, Bland, and Mary V stayed with Johnny and waited for Sudden to negotiate that rough stretch of country with the Ford. That was what Mary V's voice referred to when she couldn't see why he didn't hurry.

Between times, Bland told their side of the adventure, as far as Bland understood it. He told of the horses they had scared back, and of the horse

thieves left afoot several miles across the line. He did not know just where, however. He told of the rancho they had flown to that morning, the rancho Johnny had discovered a short mile from where he had got the plane in the first place.

The horses which they had turned loose from the field would probably make their way back, Bill said. So would the last little bunch. But he would send the boys down after them just as soon as they had put the three prisoners away in the cabin with a guard until the sheriff could come and get them. Which would be easy, Bill said. They'd telephone to the ranch and have the message repeated on the town line.

Everything was easy, Bill said, except getting Skyrider to a doctor quick, without shaking him up too much. And getting the flying machine outa there—though he guessed mebby Skyrider wouldn't want no more flyin' in his. He guessed mebby Skyrider would aim to keep one foot on solid ground hereafter—if he didn't go clean under it. That shore was a bad lookin' head he had on 'im.

Which brought forth questions from Mary V., and the somewhat qualified comfort of Bland's experience.

Johnny's next dream was a nightmare of pain and jolting. He did not know where he was, but it seemed to him that something kept pounding him on the head ; something very hot and very heavy—something he could not escape because his head was being held in a vice of some sort. The pain and the jolting seemed to have no relation to this steady beating. The dream lasted a long, long while. And after that there was darkness and silence.

That came when he had been put to bed at the Rolling R ranch house, in a guest room that faced

north. A doctor was there, waiting for them when they arrived, because Sudden had telephoned him when he had finished calling for the sheriff. The boys had told him soberly that Skyrider was bad off, and that his whole head was smashed, and that the flyin' machine was busted all to pieces. They didn't hardly think it would be worth while getting a doctor to the ranch, because they didn't see how Skyrider was goin' to last long enough for a doctor to git to work on him. It was a damn shame. Skyrider was one fine boy — and did anybody know where his folks lived?

But the doctor was sent for just the same, and he was ready to do what could be done. It looked at first as though that was not much. Mary V had kept cold cloths on Johnny's head during the whole drive, and the doctor told her that she had made it a little more possible to pull the young man through. He certainly had received a terrible blow, and—well, the doctor refused to predict anything at all. Johnny was a strong-looking, healthy young man—it took a lot to kill a youngster like that. He advised a nurse, and gave the name of a young woman who was very good, he said.

Sudden telephoned straightway for the nurse, and Mary V locked herself into her room to cry about it.

The nurse came that night, and went briskly in and out of the guest room. She wore her hair parted and slicked back from her face, and rubber heels; and she smiled reassuringly whenever she saw Mary V or Mrs. Selmer or anyone else who looked anxious. And she never once failed to close the door of the guest room gently but firmly behind her. Mary V hated that nurse with a vindictiveness wholly out of porportion to the cause.

None of these things did Johnny know. Johnny

lay quietly on his back with a neat, white bandage around his head. His eyes were closed, his face was placid with the inscrutable calm of death or deep unconsciousness. The next day it was the same, and the day after that—except that his cheeks began to hollow a little, and his eye sockets to deepen and darken.

And that pesky nurse wouldn't let Mary V stay in the room two minutes! She just shooed her out with that encouraging smile of hers, that Mary V wanted to slap. Did she think, for gracious sake, that Mary V was going to murder Johnny? Mary V was just going to tell the doctor that she had learned all about nursing, in her "Useful Knowledge" class at school. She should think she was just exactly as well qualified to moisten that bandage with whatever it was they put on it, and keep the flies out of the room, and little things like that, as any old towheaded nurse that ever shook down a thermometer.

But when the doctor came he looked so sort of sober that Mary V was afraid to ask him anything at all. She went out into the hammock on the porch, where she could see the curtains flapping gently in the open window of Johnny's room. And after awhile the doctor came out and looked at her and smiled a little, and said, "Well, have we captured any more bandits? By George, I'd hate to be one and run across you, young lady. I had the honour of repairing the damage you did to 'em; and I will say, you are so-ome bone smasher!"

Which was all very well—but what did Mary V care about the damage done to those Mexicans? She looked at the open window with the flapping curtains, and then she looked at the doctor. She did not ask a single question, and I don't think she dreamed how wistful her eyes were.

"Well, our young aviator seems to be—holding on," the doctor observed very, very casually, seeming not to see the question Mary V's eyes were asking because her lips would not form it in words. "Better, on the whole, than I expected."

"Then you think——"

"I think we won't worry about it until we have to. They're tough, these young devils."

Mary V tried and tried to wring encouragement from the words, but it was very hard, with Johnny lying like that and never moving.

They brought the aeroplane to the ranch, much as Johnny had brought it up from "the burning sands of Mexico." Mary V went out to look at it, but it seemed too terrible to think of how high Johnny's hopes had been, how he had worshipped that thing—and what it had done to him. She went to her ledge on the bluff, and sat there and cried heart-brokenly.

There it stood, reared up on its silly little wheels, with its broken propeller still pointing straight up at the sky. Its tail was broken too—and served it right for thrashing around like that in the brush.

She had not known her dad was having it brought in, until she saw them coming with it. Little Curley had driven the team, and he had looked as though he was driving a hearse. She did not even know what her dad was going to do with it. He hadn't said a word to anybody, about anything. He just went ahead as if taking care of Johnny and Johnny's aeroplane was part of the regular work on the ranch. Even Bill did not appear to know, nor Bland. Perhaps Sudden himself did not know. It seemed to Mary V that the whole ranch was just waiting, minute by minute, for Johnny to open his eyes, or stop breathing. The unbearable part of it was,

no one said anything much about it. They just waited.

The doctor came again, and he did not say anything at all to Mary V. He stayed at the ranch all night, mostly in the room with Johnny. The next day another doctor came, and the nurse went in and out of the room sterilizing things and looking very mysterious and important—but always with that intolerably reassuring smile. Mary V gritted her teeth every time she saw that nurse.

They were going to operate, the nurse said, when Mary V simply could not stand it another minute. She went and sat all curled up in the hammock, not letting it swing, but just keeping very, very still, and listening. There were voices in there mumbling sentences she could not catch. After awhile a sickly odour came drifting through the window, and more muttering between the two doctors. Sudden came wandering up, tiptoed to his chair on the porch, and sat down rather heavily and twirled a cigar in his fingers without lighting it. Mary V pulled a magazine toward her and began turning the leaves idly, her lips pressed tight together, her ears strained and listening still.

Ages passed. Twice Mary V placed her fingers over her lips to stifle an impulse to scream. Then—

"We can't make it. Damn that brush," said a new voice—Johnny's voice—quite clearly.

Mary V dropped the magazine and went and put her arms around her dad's neck and pressed her face hard against his shoulder. Her dad held her tight, and swallowed fast, and said never a word.

CHAPTER XXIV

JOHNNY'S DILEMMA

"WELL, thank heavens she's gone! Perhaps a person can have a minute or two of peace and comfort on this ranch now. I don't know when I have ever disliked a person so much. I don't see how you stood her. For my part, that creature would *make* me sick, just having her around!" As a final venting of her animosity, Mary V made faces at the car that carried the nurse back to town.

Johnny looked at Mary V, looked after the nurse, and looked at Mary V again. He had thought the nurse a very nice nurse, with a quiet kind of efficiency that soothed a fellow without any fuss or frills. It was queer Mary V did not like her, but then——

"I know I've been a darned nuisance," he apologized so meekly that he did not sound in the least like Johnny Jewel. "But I'm getting well fast. I'll be able to beat it in a few days now."

"Why, for gracious sake? Haven't we—er—made you *comfortable?*"

"Sure, you have. Only you shouldn't have put yourself out, this way. I ought to have gone to a hospital or some place." Johnny looked so distressed that Mary V could have cried. Only she was afraid that would distress him still more, and the doctor

had said he must not be worried about anything.

"It wasn't any trouble. You are being absolutely silly, so I guess you are getting well, all right. I—I didn't see any sense of having that nurse in the first place. Because I can take temperature and count pulse and everything. I've really been crazy for a chance to practise nursing on somebody. And then when I had the chance, they wouldn't let me do a thing."

Johnny grinned, which was rather pathetic—he was so thin and so white. "Why didn't you practise on the greasers?" he taunted her. "Bill says you sure made some dandy work for the hospitals."

"Well, I couldn't help that. I didn't have any way of tying them, or anything, and——"

"Brag, girl! For Lord's sake don't apologize; it doesn't come natural to you. What gets me is that I was ripping the atmosphere wide open, trying to rescue you, and all the while you were making a whole sheriff's posse of yourself—and it was you that rescued me. I should think——"

"I did not! I—did Bill tell you the latest, Johnny? You know how dad is—about making people tell things he wants to know, and keeping them right to the point——"

"I know." Johnny's tone was eloquent.

"Well, he got at those Mexicans, and they told everything they knew—and some besides. And who do you think was the real leader of that gang, Johnny? And I know now it was his voice that I couldn't quite recognize over the 'phone. They've arrested him and two or three of his men, and you wouldn't *believe* a neighbour could be so tricky and mean as that Tucker Bly. Stealing *our* horses to sell to the Mexicans, if you please, and selling his own to the Government mostly—but some to the Mexi-

cans, too, I suppose. And nobody suspecting a thing all the while, and Tex in with them and all. And if you hadn't stampeded the horses so they came back to the line, and the boys rounded them up, dad would have lost a lot more than he did. But now the whole thing is out, and really, if I hadn't caught those two greasers, there wouldn't be any evidence against the Tucker Bly outfit, or Tex either. And I just think it's awful, the way——"

She stopped abruptly. Johnny's bandaged head was leaning against the back of his big chair, and his eyes were closed. His face looked whiter than it had a few minutes ago. Mary V was scared. She should have known better than to talk of those things.

"Shall—would you like a drink, or—or something?" she asked in a small, contrite voice.

Johnny opened his eyes and looked at her.

"No, I don't want a drink; I just want somebody to give me another knock on the head that will finish me." And before Mary V could think of anything soothing to say, Johnny spoke again. "I think I'll go back and lie down awhile. I—don't feel very good."

He would not let Mary V help him at all, but walked slowly, steadying himself by the chairs, the wall, by anything solid within reach. He did not look much like the very self-assured, healthy specimen of young manhood whom Mary V could bully and tease and talk to without constraint. She felt as though she scarcely knew this thin, pale young man with the bandaged head and the sombre eyes. He seemed so aloof, as though his spirit walked alone in dark places where she could not follow.

After that she did not mention stolen horses, nor thieves, nor aeroplanes, nor anything that could pos-

sibly lead his thoughts to those taboo subjects. Under that heavy handicap conversation lagged. There seemed to be so little that she dared mention! She would sit and prattle of school and shows and such things, and tell him about the girls she knew; and half the time she knew perfectly well that Johnny was not listening. But she could not bear his moody silences, and he sat out on the porch a good deal of the time, so she had to go on talking, whether she bored him to death or not.

Then one day, when the bandage had dwindled to a small patch held in place by strips of adhesive plaster, Johnny broke into her detailed description of a silly Western picture she had seen.

"What's become of Bland?" he asked, just when she was describing a thrilling scene.

"Bland? Oh, why—Bland's gone." Mary V was very innocent as to eyes and voice, and very uneasy as to her mind.

"Gone where? He was broke. I didn't get a chance to pay him——"

"Oh, well, as to that—I suppose dad fixed him up with a ticket and so on. And so this girl, Inez, overhears them plotting——"

"Where's your dad?"

"Dad? Why, dad's in Tucson, I believe, at the trial. What *makes* you so rude when I'm telling you the most thrill——"

"When's he coming back?"

"For gracious *sake*, Johnny! What do you want of dad all at once? Am I not entertaining——"

"You are. As entertaining as a meadow lark. I love meadow larks, but I never could put in all my time listening to 'em sing. I generally had something else I had to do."

"Well, you've nothing else to do now, so listen

to this meadow lark, will you? Though I must say——"

"I'd like to, but I can't. There are things I've got to do."

"There are not! Not a single thing but be a nice boy and get well. And to get well you must——"

"A lot you know about it—you, with nothing to worry you, any more than a meadow lark. Not as much, because they do have to rustle their own worms and watch out for hawks and things, and you——"

"I suppose you would imply that I have about as much brains as a meadow lark, perhaps!" Mary V rose valiantly to the argument. If Johnny would rather quarrel than talk about things that didn't interest either of them a bit, why, a quarrel he should have.

But Johnny would not quarrel. He made no reply whatever to the tentative charge. When Mary V stopped scolding, she became aware that Johnny had not heard a word of what she had said.

"How many horses did your dad figure had been stolen? I mean, besides the ones he got back."

"Why—er—you'll have to ask dad. I don't see what that can have to do with meadow larks' brains."

"It hasn't a thing to do with brains. I was merely wondering."

"Well," Mary V retorted flippantly, "I believe the wondering is very good to-day. Help yourself, Johnny."

Johnny looked at her unsmilingly. "That," he told her bitterly, "is what I'm trying to do."

He did not explain that somewhat cryptical remark, and presently he left her and went to his room. Mary V felt that she was not being trusted by a

person who surely ought to know by this time that he needn't be so secretive about his thoughts and intentions. If she had not proved her loyalty and her friendship by this time, what did a person want her to do, for gracious sake?

Mary V had rather an unhappy time of it, the next week or so. She had, for some reason, lost all interest in collecting "Desert Glimpses"; so much so that when her mother told her she must stay close to the ranch lest she meet more of those terrible Mexican bandits, Mary V was very sweet about it and did not argue with her mother at all. She seldom went farther than the ledge, these days, and she could not keep her mind off Johnny Jewel, even when there was no doubt at all that he was nearly as well as ever.

Of course, it did not really matter—but why was Johnny so glum with her? Why wouldn't he talk, or at least quarrel the way he used to do? He did not seem angry about anything. He simply did not seem to care whether she was with him or not. She might as well be a stick or a stone, she told herself viciously, for all the attention Johnny Jewel ever paid to her. She did not mind in the least; but it did seem perfectly silly and unaccountable; she wondered merely because she hated mysteries.

It really should not have been mysterious. Mary V made the mistake of not putting herself in Johnny's place and from that angle interpreting his preoccupation. Had she done that she would have seen at once that Johnny was fighting a battle within himself. All his ideas, his plans, and his hopes had been turned bottom up, and Johnny was working over the wreck.

She sat and watched him from the ledge one day, and wondered why he did not act more pleased when

he walked down toward the corral and discovered his aeroplane all repaired, just exactly as good as it had been before. He stood there looking at it with the same apathetic gloom in his bearing that had marked him ever since he was able to be out of bed. Mary V thought he might at least show a little gratitude—not to herself, but toward her dad, because he had kept Bland and had paid him to repair the machine for Johnny, when Johnny was too sick to know anything about it—too sick even to hear the noise of it when Bland tried out the motor—and the nurse was so afraid it would disturb "her patient."

She saw her dad stroll down that way, and stop and look at the aeroplane with Johnny. Johnny seemed to be asking a few questions. But they did not talk five minutes until Johnny went off by himself to the bunk house, and stayed there. He did not even come back to the house for supper, but ate with the boys.

Mary V would have died before she would ask Johnny what was the matter, but she took what measures she could to find out, nevertheless. She asked her dad, that evening, what Johnny thought about his aeroplane being all fixed up again.

Sudden smoked for a minute or two before he answered. "Well, I don't know, kitten. He didn't say." Sudden's tone was drawling and comfortable, but Mary V somehow got the notion that her dad, too, was rather disappointed in Johnny's lack of appreciation.

"Well, but what's he going to do with it, dad?"

"He didn't say, kitten."

"Well, but dad, he was looking at it, and you were with him, and didn't he say *anything*, for gracious sake?" Mary V could not have kept the

exasperation out of her voice if she had tried. Sudden's lips quirked with the beginning of a smile. He looked at the end of his cigar, looked toward the bunk house, scraped off the cigar's ash collar on the porch rail, looked at Mary V.

" Well, he asked me how it got here to the ranch, and I told him with a wagon and team and so on. And he said, ' Mh-hum, I see.' Then he asked me who repaired it, and I told him that buttermilk-eyed aviator he'd had with him. He replied, ' I—see.' Then he asked me what the repairing had cost, and the fellow's wages or whatever he had got, and I told him, ' Dam-fi recollect, Johnny." And he didn't say a word. Just strolled off as if he'd talked himself tired—which I guess maybe he had."

" Well, but dad, what do you *suppose* he's going to do ? He—he's awfully queer since he was hurt. Do you suppose—— ? "

" Kitten," said her dad quietly, " when you're breaking a high-strung colt he sometimes sorta resents his schooling and sulks. Then you've just got to wait till he figures things out for himself a little. If you force him you're liable to spoil him and make him mean. Johnny's like that. He's just a high-strung human colt that life is breaking. I guess, kitten, we better not crowd him right now."

" Well, I don't see why he should act that way with *me,*" Mary V complained, and thereby proved herself altogether human and feminine in her point of view.

CHAPTER XXV

SKYRIDER "HAS FLEW"!

JUST at dawn the humming of the aeroplane motor woke Mary V. She sat up in bed and listened, a little fear gripping at her heart; a fear which she fought with her reason, her hopes, and all her natural optimism. Surely Johnny would not be foolish enough to attempt a flight that morning. He must be just trying out the motor. He would know he was not yet in condition to bear any physical or nervous strain, sick as he had been. Of course he wouldn't be so selfish as to make a flight without so much as asking her if she would like to go with him. He knew she was simply crazy over flying.

By that time she was out on the porch, where she was immediately joined by her father and mother, also awakened by the motor. They were just in time. From the neighbourhood of the corral came an increasing roar. A sudden rush of cool morning wind brought dust and bits of hay and gravel flying in a cloud. A great, wide-winged, teetering bird-thing went racing out into sight, spurned the earth and lifted, climbed steadily, circling like a hungry hawk over a meadow full of mice.

"By heck, the boy can fly, all right!" Sudden

paid tribute to Johnny's skill in one unpremeditated ejaculation. "An aeroplane using our very dooryard for a flying field, mommie! Times are certainly changing."

Mary V bit her lip and blinked very fast while she watched the plane go circling up and up, the motor droning its monotonous song like a hive of honey bees at work. It was pure madness for Johnny to attempt flying so soon again. He would be killed; anything could happen that was terrible. She shut her eyes for a minute, trying to rout a swift vision of Johnny crumpled down limp in the pilot's seat as she had seen him that day—nearly a month ago—with Bland, white-faced and helpless, walking aimlessly around the crippled plane, so sure Johnny was dead that he would not touch him to find out. If anything like that should happen again, Mary V believed that she would go crazy. She simply couldn't stand it to go through such a horror again.

The plane was circling around once more and flew straight north-east. They watched it until they could not hear the humming; until it looked like a bird against the glow of sunrise.

"Hm-mm. I wonder where——" Sudden began, but Mary V did not stay to hear the rest of the sentence.

She went back and crept into her bed, sick at heart with an unnamed fear and a hurt that went deep into her soul. She gave a little dry sob or two and then lay very still, with her face crushed into a pillow.

But Mary V was not born to take life's hurts passively. Presently she dressed and went straight down to the bunk house, where she knew the boys would be at their breakfast—unless they had fin-

ished and gone to the corral. She walked into the old-fashioned, low-ceiled living room where she had first learned to walk, and stood just inside the door, smiling a little.

Bud had just finished eating, and was rolling a cigarette before he got up from the long table. The others were finishing their coffee and hot biscuits, and they said "Hello" to Mary V and went on undisturbed.

"Hello—what's all that racket I heard as I was getting up?" Mary V inquired lightly. "My good gracious, I thought you boys had started a sawmill—or maybe that somebody had overslept down here and was snoring. It sounded like Aleck."

They laughed, and Curley spoke. "That there was Skyrider. He has flew——"

Bud, fumbling for a match, had a fit of genius. He grinned, cleared his throat, and began to warble unexpectedly.

"Skyrider-r has flew into-o the blew
Ta-da, da-da, da-daa-a-a—
No-obody knew what he aimed to do
Till he went and said adieu.

"Says he, 'Good-bye, I aim to fly
To foreign lands, ta da-a—'"

"Oh, for gracious *sake*, Bud. I always knew you were queer at times, but I really didn't know you had fits. So it was Skyrider riding off to call on Venus, was it? I wish I had seen him start; but that's just my luck, of course. Er—*where* was he going? Or didn't he say?"

"He didn't say. But he shook hands with us and

told us we had treated him white at times, and that some day he'd write——"

"Oh, say! I got a letter he left for your father," Curley broke in. "I'll git it and you can take it up to the house." He gave Mary V a mysterious look and went into the room where he slept.

Mary V followed him as far as the door, and saw Curley take two letters from under his pillow. Her heart gave a jump at that, and it began to beat very fast when he turned and put them into her hand with another mysterious look.

She thanked him and hurried out on the porch and straight to her pet ledge. Her dad's letter could wait.

On the ledge she sat down, and with fingers that shook she tore open an envelope addressed to "Miss Mary V. Selmer, care of Curley." It had been sealed very tightly, as though it contained secrets. Which it did.

Mary V read that letter through from beginning to end five times before she left the ledge. It was not exactly a love letter, either, though Mary V squeezed it between her palms and then kissed it before she put it away out of sight. After that she cried lonesomely and stared away into that part of the sky where Johnny and his aeroplane had last been a disappearing speck.

"*Dear Mary V*" (Johnny had written), "I'm not going to tell anybody good-bye. Not even you, or I might say especially not you. It's hard enough to go as it is.

"Maybe you won't care much, but I am a hopeful cuss, and I'm going to build air castles about you till I come back, which I hope to do when I have made

good. I made an awful mess of things here, and it's up to me to make good now before I say anything to you about air castles and so on.

"I told you once that they need flyers in France, and that's where I'm going if they will have me. I've got to fly and that's all there is to it, and I can't fly and be a stock hand at one and the same time because the two don't go together worth a cent, and I have sure found that out, and so has your dad, I guess."

"Well, I can't ask you to wait till I have made good, because that wouldn't be square, but I can say that when I have made good I am coming back, and then if some other fellow has got the start of me he will sure have to go some to keep his start. Because I am going to have you some day, if I have anything to say about it. I'll teach you to fly, and we will sure part the clouds like foam and all the rest of it. You've got more nerve than any other girl I ever saw, and, anyway, I'd like you just the same if you was a coward, because I couldn't help it no matter what you was, just so you were Mary V.

"So good-bye, and look for me back with my chest all dolled up with medals, because I am sure coming if you will let me. When I get to Tucson, I'll call you up on long distance, and then if your folks ain't in the room, I wish you'd tell me if it's all right with you, my loving you the way I do. Or if they are in the room, you can just say 'All right,' and I'll know what you mean. And anyway I'll write to you and I hope you'll write to me, because I am sure going to miss you till I come back. I wish I had the nerve to go right up to the house and tell you all this instead of writing, but I know I couldn't do it, so I won't try. But you be sure and let me

know some way over the 'phone. So good-bye for the present. Always your faithful Skyrider, JOHNNY."

His letter to her father was not so long, and it was more coherent. To Sudden he had written:

"MR. SELMER.

"*Dear Sir,*—I have decided to fly my aeroplane to where I can sell it, and will turn the money over to you to help pay for the expense you have been under of having your horses stole. I can't find out how many you lost all told, but whatever I can get for the plane will not cover it, I am afraid, so I will make up the balance as soon as possible.

"I want to thank you for all the kindness of yourself and family while I was sick, and before and afterwards. You have certainly treated me white, and much better than I deserve, and I certainly appreciate it all, and some day I will refund every nickel you are out on account of having me in your employ. The doctor's bill I intend to pay and the nurse, too, and whatever you were out on getting the plane repaired.

"I am thinking of enlisting somewhere as an aviator, as that seems to be my chosen field. I am leaving early in the morning if the weather is all right for flying, and one of the boys will give you this letter so you will know why I went and not think I sneaked off. I am fully determined to make good, and when I have done so I will come back and finish squaring up for your trouble and expense in having the horses stole. I feel that I balled things up bad, and it is my desire to square everything up.

"I feel that it is merely the square thing to tell

you I love your daughter Mary V, and I hope you will not object to having me marry her when I have made good. Of course, I would not want to until I had done so. And I hope that will be all right with you; but if it isn't, it is only fair to tell you that you won't be able to stop me if she is willing, and I hope she is. So I am merely telling you, and not asking, because that ain't my style; when I have made good I will do my asking to Mary V. And I hope you will not think I have got my gall, because I am very grateful for all you have done for me and your family also. I will write when I have made some deal to turn the plane so I can send you whatever it brings.

"Yours truly,

"JOHN IVAN JEWEL"

Old Sudden did not say anything when he had read that letter—read it twice, to be exact. He folded it carefully and gave it to his wife to read, and sat smoothing down his face with his hand while she studied it, reading slowly, sometimes going back to get the full meaning out of a somewhat involved sentence.

"Johnny's a dear boy," she observed meditatively, after they had sat for a little while in silence. "I hope he doesn't enlist in that terrible war; it's so dangerous!"

Sudden turned in his chair and looked in through a window to where Mary V was sitting very quietly within three feet of the telephone, her album of "Desert Glimpses" in her lap. Undoubtedly Mary V was listening, but she was also undoubtedly waiting for something. He looked at his wife, and his wife also glanced into the room and

caught the significance of Mary V's position and attitude.

The telephone rang, and Mary V dropped the album in her haste to answer the call. She glanced out at them while she announced, "Yes, this is Mary V—it's *all right*—right on the porch, but it's all right——"

Dad and mommie took the hint and withdrew.

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner, *Frome and London*

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